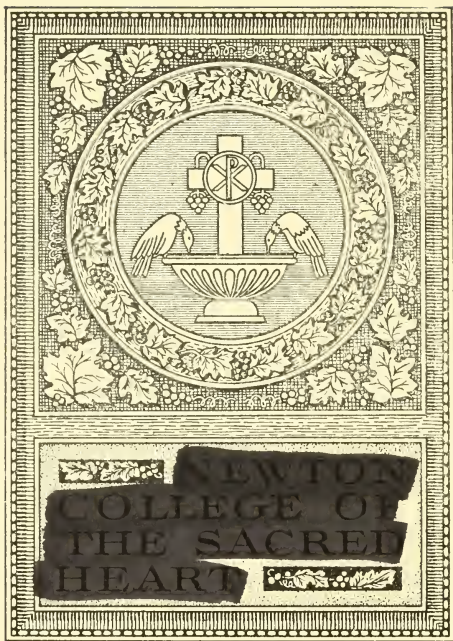

HURDCOTT



JOHN AYSCOUGH





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HURDCOTT

BY

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& Francis Bickerstaffe-Drew

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THE FIRST INDUCTION

ON the hump of down between Avonsbury and Folly Bottom a shepherd was watching by his sheep, and thinking of those other shepherds who, nearly eighteen hundred years before him, had watched theirs in the winter fields by Bethlehem. For down in the cup of the plain where Avonsbury huddles the first bells of Christmas were ringing; and through the frozen air their sound came plainly, there being no wind to scatter it. The air was motionless, stagnant, like a fathomless chill water, black and bitter.

All the plain was white in the pale glimmer of stars as brilliant as the slip of moon that had been new two days ago: white, not with snow, but with the frost that had come but yesterday: before there had been many mild days, beginning in thick mist that lifted at mid-day and gave place to warm sunshine lasting almost to dayfall, when the white fog drew again over the downs. Up here on the empty down the shepherd was to keep his Christmas, as he kept Sunday, alone, and shelterless but for the hut of wattles and straw he had built himself at the corner of the fold.

The fold was four-square, of wattles likewise, padded thick with straw, and with overhanging hurdles; it held over a hundred ewes, and already there were lambs, though only a few had been in such hurry to get into the frozen world.

Now and then came a low bleat, not often; in general there was but the sound of breathing, that perhaps only the shepherd could have heard — that and the remote

music of the bells. Presently that ceased also, the ringers going off to begin their Christmas junketing, and silence held the plain in its grip.

But Cormac was not lonesome; perhaps they seldom are who live always alone. And Cormac was a solitary by choice. He had had a home once, far away on that edge of the great ocean where Europe ends, and had wandered from it coming over here to the reaping. Innocent he had always been, clean of life, of clean lips and thought, and already by nature if not yet by practice, devout. He loved justice, half wildly, and hated iniquity, above all uncleanness and oppression. And he had been fated to see an act of oppression, to prevent an uncleanness, slaying the brutal wrong-doer, not intending murder but rescue. His hand had been heavier than he had meant, and his unmeant crime had appalled himself; there had been no attempt to escape its consequence; he had given himself up instantly, telling the naked truth of what he had done: the girl he had saved from shame bore witness for him, and he was acquitted.

Home he never went. Homeless he condemned himself to be, an outlander and friendless. He had taken to this calling of a shepherd, and for near twenty years had done his unwatched penance. Long ago he knew himself pardoned, and he had found his intended friendlessness grow year by year into an unseen friendship.

He could not even read: of lives of saints and solitaries he knew nothing, but he had grown marvellously like them by the plain road of love and simplicity. He was a natural mystic, with the ever-changing plain for breviary: the Our Father and Hail Mary were all the prayers he could say; so would he have said of himself; but in fact his whole existence was prayer, that highest of love and union.

He did not even look like the common shepherd of the plain: his dress was much the same but he carried

it differently. There was no slouch: and his ragged cloak, and ragged beard, his high battered hat, now almost conical, would have made an artist who knew the south remember Rome and shepherds he had seen there come in from the campagna.

But he had none of their wolfishness.

His eyes were still young, brilliant and clear, but singularly soft and gentle, and no beard could hide the exquisite tenderness of his mouth. He, who had killed a man, could not now bear to kill or hunt anything: the downs which look so lonely and so empty were full of his friends, small shy creatures that need not have run from him, and that he loved as his little poor brothers, whom God in Heaven was not too busy to watch and feed.

Down in the village people knew him, and knew some vague distortion of his story, and none had anything but good will and a sort of bewilderment of respect for him, none, however, were intimate with him. His life lay outside theirs, up on the serene, incurious freedom of the plains. "Mr. Roke," was a mystery; not because there was anything rare or unfamiliar in his lonely life of a shepherd, but because he himself was rare and uncommon.

He had been reckoned very handsome, but no young lass of the villages by Bourne on Avon had ever won a love-look from him.

"Mr. Rook he be as circumskempt as a tattery ole man," Stephen Futchter, the drowner, had said of him when Cormac was not yet five and twenty.

In case of ignorance on the readers' part it may be explained that the drowner is an official charged with the duty of opening and closing the hatches whereby the river is let out of "back-carriers" on to the low meads by Avon and by Bourne. Mr. Futchter at that time of speaking was no longer young, and handsome

no Fatcher had ever been, but even then he was not himself noted for being "circumskempt."

"Mr. Arook!" observed another critic. "There! He niver drinks not but the jew, like larks and wizzels: not if you was to ha' it ready drord for'n, and froamin' (as you might say), in the tanket."

Now, Eldred Musselwhite, who bore this witness to Cormac's sobriety, was walking postman, and never known to refuse anything but buttermilk.

"His trew baptismal name, howsiver," added Mr. Musselwhite, who held himself an authority on surnames from seeing so many on the letters, "is not Roke, nor Rook, nor Ruck, as some erpines: but Arook, as I pronounce it, in two syllabuls."

The postman had been to school, and was aware still of the existence of pronouns, though oblivious of their function.

"Still," said Mrs. Billet of the Queensberry Arms in whose taproom this discussion took place, "it's odd as he don't get married. The more circumskempt lads be the more you'd say they'd do it."

"It's along of his being a Roman Catholic," explained the schoolmaster, Obed Kite. "In that religion they're all monks or nuns, as the learned know by many examples. That's how it died out in England."

"Nay," objected the carrier, Rube Lowmeadow. "I know Tisbury way, I do, and I've seed Lord War-don, and his lady as well—in a velvet gound with sandwich feathers and that. They was married, you lay your life: and Roman what-you-calls as large as life."

"Very like!" retorted the schoolmaster, "by a dispensation! You can do almost anything in that religion by a dispensation but they come expensive. And I never heard say that Mr. Rook was wealthy. Take

my word for it, Mrs. Billet, the Roman Catholics as a body are neither married nor given in marriage, like the angels in Heaven."

"Well, but, Mr. Kite," said Mrs. Billett, "it's natural in the angels, being all ladies as anybody can see by their clothing, tho' old fashioned."

"Nay, Ma'am," Obed replied with his learned smile, that had almost a clerical smack in it, for he was parish clerk as well as schoolmaster. "You're not strictly accurate there. The angels aren't all of your amiable sex. There was Tobit's friend, the 'Pochrypha angel for instance. . . ."

"Potiphar weren't no angel by what I've heard," sniggered the postman.

"Tut, tut, Mr. Musselwhite," cried the landlady. "Let's have no talk o' that sort here: in church is bad enough, but not in this well-conducted tap."

"And you're mixing up Potiphar and his wife," said Mr. Kite. "A little learning is a dangerous thing, drink deep or, Mr. Musselwhite, avoid the Pyrrhan spring."

As the postman could not readily avoid the spring in question, through ignorance of its whereabouts, he adopted the alternative and raising his tankard aloft drank deep.

In such conversations as these Cormac's name was often mentioned, but there was not much personal intercourse with him. Other shepherds would pass a word or two with him, now and then, out on the downs; but they held him to be, in a superior kind of way, a bit out of his head, and were puzzled whether to look down on him or look up to him.

The long hill, from the top of the Beacon down to Folly Bottom, is steep and straight, and the road, that was the high coach-road from London to Bath, was

skimmed, that night of Christmas Eve, with a thin glaze of ice, for it had rained two nights ago and last night came the bitter frost.

They had changed horses — in sixty-seven seconds — at Parkhouse, and after the first level mile had toiled up the still hill to the shoulder of the Beacon, and now the coach came heltering skeltering down, and the noise of it reached Cormac, for, as the crow flies, there was but half a mile between him and the bottom where the crash came. He heard that too, though he could have seen nothing had it been broad day, for the down humped up a little just beyond the fold. The quick twang of the horn reached him, the scrabbling of the horses' feet, the scrape of the wheels with the drag on them, shouts of men, and a thin scream or two from women.

It did not last long: the lights of Ratfin farm could be seen from the road, then, from where the Rocket had overturned, and some of the passengers had gone thither to ask shelter, the guard to demand help; others had walked on perhaps into Avonsbury; and soon the coachman and his horses were left alone with the overturned coach. But presently another sound cut into the chill silence and Cormac lifted his head sharply to listen. The echo of the Christmas bells was still in his ears, and before his eyes hung like an arras, the picture — his own picture — of the first Christmas. His thoughts were entangled with it — even the sound that made him lift his head so suddenly could not disentangle them. The sound was strange there, where he supposed himself so utterly alone: a cry no lamb or sheep could make: not loud or screaming, but clearly heard in the dense and frozen stillness.

The shepherd stood up at the door of his shelter and listened, and soon the cry came again, quick, short and impatient: and Cormac picked up his lantern and walked

towards it. It came from beyond the fold: even a grown person stooping could not have been seen there from where he had been sitting: and the cry was not like that of man or woman. He went round the fold quickly, his eyes keenly turned hither and thither through the dim light of the stars. No doubt he could see better in rich obscurity than one unused to be out all night upon the plain. Nevertheless, he could not see far: no living being was within his range of sight.

But when he had reached the side of the fold farthest from where he had been sitting the cry came again sharp and clear, and now it was easy to note exactly whence it sounded. No man or woman was to be seen, but he noted promptly a heap of straw piled loose against the outward side of the wattle wall of the fold that he knew well he had not placed there. On such a night of gasping stillness he half wondered it could have been set there without his hearing: it must have been done with extreme care and caution. Just as he reached the place the cry came again out of the lightly piled straw itself; and, bending down, he put it gently aside, to right and left, and found, nestled among it a tiny child. Of babies the shepherd knew nothing: had it been a lamb he could have told its age to an hour almost: as it was he could only know that it was very young; new born it could hardly be, for it was fully clad and warmly wrapped, so that only the wee face, with shining, wide-open black eyes, was to be seen. Standing up again to his full height he looked about once more, lifting the lantern as high as his head: its rays were dim enough, and did not spread far, only bringing the rim of darkness narrower in. He could see no one: but his own face was seen. Behind a tall clump of wild juniper a woman knelt and watched him, ready to start up and flee at any sign that her own presence was suspected. She could see his face plainly,

as he held the lantern close to it; and it satisfied her. Keen as the bright dark eyes were their gentleness and sweetness were plain. Such eyes could never be pitiless or selfish, indolently unkind. Presently the tall man stooped again, and lifted the young child from the straw, nestling it against his breast. The baby made a small happy noise of contentment, and the man's face lighted with a smile of sheer tenderness and pleasure: the woman smiled too, half pitifully; and watched him go back to his shelter at the other side of the fold, his lantern flinging queer shadows of himself and his burden on the frozen grass: then noiselessly the woman rose to her feet and sped away.

THE SECOND INDUCTION

IN the *mofussil* of the Gangetic Delta, in the huge dining-room of a huge house, its owner and one guest were sitting at table though dinner was done.

The planter was a youngish man with a handsome irritable face, a distinguished figure and bearing, and the air of wealth and consequence. He was, in fact, rich, for his immense house stood in the midst of an estate of over three hundred thousand acres whose fat alluvial soil was a hundred feet in depth — teeming and inexhaustible. And he was of a noble English family his father having been brother to that Lord Solent who was so intimate with George III before his accession, and so objectionable in consequence to George II. The Honourable Frederick Hungerford went out to India about the year 1760, and married a nabobess, Miss Burling, who had lately inherited the large property that now had descended to her son Leonard Hungerford. She was long dead and not much remembered, though it had not been forgotten by her husband, who disliked his elder brothers, that the wealth he was able to bequeath his only child came from her and not from his family.

The guest was not much older than the host, and, if he looked less irritable his expression was that of a man who would be likely to fall foul of a man of difficult temper and considerable self-esteem. For though the elder gentleman could owe no consequence to wealth or rank his manner was consequential and self-satisfied.

The host thought something of his position and a good deal of himself. Brought up in India he had

been a spoiled child and a spoiled boy: any neighbour whose greater importance might have done him good was too distant to be of much use, and circumstances, especially the circumstance of his marriage had inclined Mr. Hungerford to live much to himself. The Reverend Justin Filmour, who had neither wealth nor any particularly high birth to be proud of, thought a great deal of his calling, which he held to be the highest on earth; and, further, he reminded himself that its importance would not fade with death, as all temporal elevation must, but would assure him a special rank beyond the grave. He was a clergyman with a view of the priestly dignity very unusually high at the close of the eighteenth century.

Mr. Filmour was a sort of anachronism, nearly two centuries too late for Laud, and a full generation too early for Pusey. In the modern sense he might hardly have been held High Church: nevertheless, he firmly believed some of the most distinctive, high, ecclesiastical doctrines. He was particularly well assured of being himself a lineal descendant of the apostles, and he had a rigid belief in the sacraments, though not perhaps in quite so many of them as an advanced Anglican divine would count to-day.

Though it was Christmas Eve, and the season preached hospitality and peace both had been already infringed. It is not hospitable to quarrel with a guest, nor is it a short-cut to good will to contradict a host in a manner implying but a moderate estimation of his opinions or judgment.

The room was very big, and, though furnished almost splendidly, there was a palatial bareness about it that made the raised voices of Mr. Hungerford and Mr. Filmour echo loudly. Overhead, for the great house was built in two storeys, was the nursery, which the young planter was too much out of temper to remember,

and up there the noisy discussion was keeping his little son awake.

The argument had begun almost with the soup, and was not now ended when dessert was being handed round.

Mr. Hungerford had begun by receiving with flippant cheerfulness his guest's solemn account of the apostasy of a promising convent. The young neophyte had fallen in love with a woman of what had been his own caste, one of the lowest, and she had refused to listen to him till he should have returned to the faith of his fathers.

"You should not," declared Hungerford, with a provoking smile, "be scandalized to find a proof of conscience outside your own church."

"What concerns me," retorted the clergyman, "is to find proof of conscience in the members of my own church, of which this young man had become one. He should have had no thought of marriage except with a Christian — in fact he could not truly have married any other."

The missionary was too much occupied with his own view of the subject to recollect, even after he had spoken, the personal bearing his speech might well seem to have in the ears of his host. But Hungerford was not the man to miss or let it pass. His own wife, who was not dead a year, had been a Burmese lady whom he had made no attempt to convert, conscious, perhaps, that she cared much more for her religion than he had ever cared for his. But he knew, or guessed, that Mr. Filmour had tried, and now he felt elated that the effort had failed.

"I gave the young couple a wedding present," he observed complacently. "I thought his marriage the honestest thing your pretty convert had ever done."

"It is," protested the clergyman, "scarce decent in

a Christian to show such joy over the loss of a Christian soul."

"To start with I never regarded the fellow as a Christian, and to go on with I don't see why you are to take for granted his soul will be lost."

"Apostasy is an unpardonable offence — the sin against the Holy Ghost."

"The lad knew as much about the Holy Ghost as he knew about Queen Elizabeth. If anyone is answerable it is you; you tried to upset, evidently in vain, his inherited belief in the ancient religion his fathers had saved their souls by for over three thousand years."

"Who is begging the question now?"

"You mean to hint that his forefathers were all damned?"

"Unless a man is born again of water and the Holy Ghost he cannot enter into the Kingdom of Heaven."

"You mean baptized? Who baptized Adam?"

"Adam was born constituted in grace —" Mr. Filmour was beginning, but his host pounced ruthlessly on his slip of the tongue.

"Adam was born, was he? I never remember hearing of his parents."

The clergyman did not grow gentler with the sense of a merely verbal mistake, and explained himself laboriously, as one might to a slow-witted person who must be treated with patient condescension.

So throughout dinner the discussion did not flag, gathering in acerbity what it lost in frankness.

"For my part," declared Hungerford, "I confess your endeavours to convert these people seem to me not only ineffectual but uncalled for."

Now Mr. Filmour was even less pleased to hear his life's work spoken of as ineffectual than he liked to have it called officious.

"I have myself baptized over seventy natives," he was beginning.

"So could I baptize the dumb waiter," interrupted the planter.

There certainly was a dumb-waiter just now placed at his elbow, but nearly as close was a waiter at all events not deaf, who may have understood enough English to grasp the meaning of his master's rude speech.

On every ground of decency and taste Mr. Filmour felt that his host was indefensible: and, like most guests, he had a high opinion of the duties of a host.

He held his peace, but his silence was almost more provocative than any words could have been. It expressed everything most annoying to an antagonist in debate, superiority, elaborate abstention, and outraged dignity.

"Who asked us to come and teach these people our alien religion?" demanded Mr. Hungerford. "Their own was in possession here at least eighteen hundred years before your heathen ancestors became Christians."

"And these people are heathens still."

"Heathens! Hindus heathen! Either you say what you know to be untrue or you try to convert a people of whose religion, after fifteen years among them, you have learned nothing."

Mr. Filmour made no verbal retort: but he laid down his knife and fork, and, after a steady deliberate glance at his host, took them slowly up again. Hungerford understood the meaning to be, "Can I go on eating the food of a host who insults me? Yes: his violence and rudeness puts him beneath me. *I* will not quarrel. That takes two."

"Come," protested the younger man, less offensively, but as with an impatient appeal to his guest's candour. "You do know the Hindu religion is not heathenism."

But the clergyman would make no such admission. "I know," he said doggedly, "nothing of it which proves the contrary."

After a moment's pause Hungerford, with a coldness that was much more really rude than his former heat, declared:

"Then I can only repeat that after some considerable facilities for informing yourself you know nothing of Hinduism at all."

"I came here," observed Mr. Filmour in a full round voice, with erect head and broadened shoulders, "to teach Christianity not to learn Hinduism."

"How can you show to be false a faith of which you are ignorant?"

Now Hungerford, who was really more intelligent than his guest, though not near so good a man, knew that there was a just and simple answer ready to Filmour's hand if only he would use it. "Why doesn't he reply," the planter asked himself. "It is not by demonstrating the falsehood of Hinduism that I would proceed, but by displaying the truth and beauty of the faith of Christ."

But Filmour made no answer at all. His air was that of one who had never come down into the lists; but had merely let drop into them his handkerchief. And that was in fact his sentiment: it did not, in his opinion, behove a priest to reason with a layman but to instruct him. Whereas, Mr. Hungerford was not disposed to be instructed.

Though scarce eighty miles north of Calcutta it was cold enough to make fire pleasant, and in the grate some logs blazed with homely cheer. The pillars and cornice were hung with garlands of holly profusely berried, of mistletoe and ivy, that in so large a room hardly betrayed themselves to be artificial. There had been mince-pies, and a plum-pudding in a fiery lake of

brandy. But, though Christmas was being ushered in, the air was not Christmas-like. Perhaps the clergyman bethought him that none of those who set the festal fare upon the board believed in the Child whose birthday was beginning: perhaps he told himself, bitterly, that his host could have no true belief in Him.

For some while there was a stiff silence, all unlike that of easy friendship that is not driven to talk for fashion; then dessert began and Hungerford with gentler voice and manner bade his guest fill up his glass.

"A Merry Christmas," he said lifting his own, with a sigh he could not smother. Filmour bowed and touched glasses with his host as he returned the old greeting. For a moment it seemed as if tension might be relaxed and a more seasonable peace be ushered in.

"For me," said Hungerford, not aggressively, but sadly, "it can be no Merry Christmas this. Last year she was with me."

Filmour looked grave, and meant to look sympathetic; but his thoughts expressed themselves too plainly, and he was questioning what Christ's birthday had to do with a Buddhist lady. By ill luck his host's eye was on his face, and read it plainly. The young widower's eyes darkened, clouding more blackly than before.

"This is your first visit here since her death," he broke out, "and you have not said one word of condolence for my loss."

The clergyman moved, not easily, in his chair, and said quietly enough:

"That is true. But can you make no allowance for my wish to avoid subjects on which we cannot see alike?"

"Is a man's loss of his young wife a doubtful subject of condolence?"

Filmour was not in most things a stupid man, but he

lacked those fibres of priest charity that teach tact even to the awkward and boorish.

"With your sorrow," he began, not badly, "I do sympathize and deeply. But it is your own and sacred. . . ."

The younger man's face lightened, and he was almost holding out a hand of real friendship: but, alas, the missionary did not stop there.

"That," he added, "would, I thought, excuse my silence. But I am not enemy or friend: I have a higher relation — that of a priest. God's providence it is not mine to question. . . ."

Hungerford's hand lay clutched in his lap and he did not stretch it forth.

". . . And if you force me to be explicit: to account for the silence I thought best, I must say the truth. Your grief is natural: nevertheless, it is possible even for me, with my imperfect human vision, to perceive God's wisdom displayed in that which brings you pain."

Unfortunately the clergyman liked the roundings of his own judicial speech: as he talked his voice grew more assured, more didactic, and less gentle. He was, he felt, to deliver his soul.

"Your station here," he went on, hardening himself to his duty and therefore speaking more hardly, "is a high one: but while that lady lived it was a false one."

His own somewhat prominent cold eyes were fixed upon the emblematic garlands that decked the room for the Christian feast: he did not turn them on his host's, burning darkly, who made at first no sound.

"You are," the measured voice continued, "by birth, at least, and nationality, certainly a Christian: by profession also so far as anyone has the right to judge. But the lady you had taken was not —"

“ ‘The lady I had taken ’: are you speaking of Mrs. Hungerford, my wife? ”

The clergyman paused: but having begun he assured himself that he ought to end and not flinch. He lowered his voice indeed, and his eyes, but said chilly:

“ Mrs. Hungerford no doubt by man’s law — as far as I understand: but not your wife by God’s.”

The planter leapt to his feet and strode to the hearth.

“ Not my wife! Married as we were by her rites and by mine! ”

“ Between a baptized Christian and a heathen unbaptized there may be a civil contract of matrimony, that the state may hold legal, for what I know. There can be no marriage that God and His Church allow as a sacramental union.”

Hungerford heard, and would hear no more. He walked swiftly from the room, and quickly reached his child’s nursery. The little boy was still awake, playing with the gifts he had found under his pillow, that should not have been found till morning.

The large room, with close-drawn white curtains, was warmly lighted by a blazing fire of logs. Over the child’s cot was hung an old picture, embroidered in silks by long dead hands of some man, showing the Virgin Mother holding her Divine nestling to her breast. Hungerford’s Buddhist wife had found it somewhere about the great house and had hung it there, over her child’s bed, though he did not know it. He tore it now from its place and flung it into the red-hot heart of the fire.

“ From to-night,” he said, “ my son is mine only. The God of Europe shall have no share in him: nor the Christ of the bigotted priests.”

HURDCOTT

CHAPTER I

UP in his own small parlour, with the bulgy window, in the Pheasant Inn, the famous Mr. Hazlitt was playing whist, with Elia and his sister, and the parson of Summerquick for fourth. The warm curtains, once of a strong mulberry hue, now faded to a ruddy purplish brown, were drawn close: the ashes had been thrown up, and the hearth was clean. Tishlite, the cat, who had but one eye, was blinking as well as he could at the red glow of the fire, conscious of digesting at his ease a plump but youthful mouse he had caught for his tea. The parson, less easily, was digesting some of the harder nuts of Mr. Hazlitt's wisdom that he had been served with for season to his own tea and toast. Mr. Lamb was engaged with his cards, and certain half-whimsical half-loving memories they were apt to bring him of the venerable kinswoman who had taught him that whist, rightly considered, as almost a part of decent English Christianity. Parson Strong was his partner, so his sister and the great Mr. Hazlitt had each one side of his beautiful profile turned to them. Mary often glanced longingly at the side presented her: the learned man of letters was less apt to consideration of so small a matter as another man's beauty.

Elia's exquisitely curved lips were scarcely parted, yet there was a smile almost healing on them.

The Reverend David Strong liked Elia better than he

liked Hazlitt, and, perhaps on that account, valued him less. Nor was he as sensible of his fame, which was of a softer sort. Hazlitt *looked* famous, and looked as if he meant it: whereas Lamb looked delightful.

Both were, as Mr. Strong knew, essayists: but Elia's were just essays — in the original meaning — suggestions of notions: whereas Mr. Hazlitt's were flat pronouncements like the definitions of a sombre but self-satisfied antipope. The parson, unaided by the verdict of posterity, took Lamb to be, as a writer, of but secondary account. Elia was waywardly pleased to deliver himself on trivial pretexts, and a man who chooses for his theme his aunt's ideas of a game can hardly challenge the same weighty consideration as he who calls Heaven and earth to justify themselves before him.

Mr. Strong seldom gave much attention to Lamb's pretty oddities of fancy, but he accorded Mr. Hazlitt's brilliant, if perverse theories the tribute of frequent disapproval and contradiction.

On such occasions Hazlitt was often bored by the parson, whose calling he somewhat disliked, and whose mental calibre he conceived hardly entitled him to equal discussion. Elia was not disposed to allow anyone the power of boring him, and would rather insist, smilingly, on such folk amusing him instead. Instead of suffering fools gladly he deftly converted them into playthings of his subtle and ingenious, simple-seeming fancy. Hazlitt had no idea of suffering a fool at all — not that Parson Strong was one: on the contrary he was a man of some original parts ruthlessly truncated by what he had esteemed education. At seventeen he had been ignorant and seemed clever: at seven and thirty he carried about with him a cud of unchewed learning and had given over being clever. However, he still affected intellectual talk, and, in his parsonage on Summerquick down, had no great facility of coming at it. So that

Mr. Hazlitt's long sojourn in the Pheasant Inn, or Hut as it was commonly called, was a windfall to him: especially as the great man was wont to suffer London friends, of a bookish turn, to come down on occasion and admire his philosophic seclusion.

Parson Strong had thus met, in the bulgy-windowed upper parlour at the Hut, several famous persons, or such as were awaiting fame, not always, as has been hinted, fully aware of the angels who were entertaining him.

Some, like Mr. Hazlitt himself, had the convenient knack of appearing illustrious — always a useful aid to contemporary and immediate distinction. But others, like Elia, were more content to merit fame than to betray a sense of having arrived at it.

There was not, of course, much talk: for Elia held his tongue, in general, at whist, but of loyalty to his aunt's strict principles: Mary had nothing ready, and Mr. Hazlitt was unwont to squander conversation as a mere supplement to other occupation. When he talked he did nothing else, and it behoved his company to do nought else but listen.

Tishlite, the cat, purred at the fire that replied with small comfortable noises of its own: the cards dropped on the shabby baize cover of the table as silently as leaves, and Miss Lamb's silk gown made but soft rustlings now and then as she moved in her seat. There was scarce other sound, for the night was still and windless, with a threat of snow, and the tree outside forebore pecking at the window with his naked black fingers, as he could do in fitful humours when the east wind chafed him.

Presently came the roll of wheels, and stamping of horsehoofs on the dry road, the London coach tearing down the last hill to draw up at the Hut for its change of horses before the short stage into Chalkminster.

"Punctual to five minutes," said Mary with a glance at Mr. Hazlitt's time-piece on the chimney — a fine French *haloge*, of inlaid brass and tortoise-shell with *mutantur et nos* round the dial for posy.

Down in the taproom at the back of the house the scene and the company was naturally less elegant. It was a small room for a dozen men to be crowded into, but at least that number had gathered there since dusk fell. The sand on the floor was no longer clean but trampled and foul, the fire was smoking as the men were, and the smell of fustian, tobacco and beer was mixed with that of the coal-smoke. The door was shut as well as the window so the air was thickish.

On one side of the fire stood a tall settle: dark green at the top and back, but worn bare of paint on the front as high as the shoulders of those who sat on it. On the other side was a cupboard-door towards which the eyes of the company were often turned.

"All right, Jabe?" asked one, lifting one eyebrow in a queer habit of his.

"Right as rain," said Jabez without explaining wherein the essential rectitude of rain might lie.

"All friends, Jabe," observed a third fellow. "Let's have a look."

Jabez gave an upward jerk of his chin, equivalent to a Frenchman's shoulder-shrug.

"What's the good?" he asked.

"There! Just the pleasure o' seein' the beauties, man."

"Good labourers loves them tools," remarked a fourth man, with a more complete air of slouch about him than anyone in the room.

"Wunnerful affeckshunt Jarge must feel toats his'n, then," observed a fifth and older man, locally esteemed for his sarcasm.

To tell the truth none of these gentry were outwardly

attractive. Poor they could not help being on a wage of six shillings a week, and even less: dirty they need not, perhaps, have been; half-reckless, half-sunning some of them looked: none merry, or jovial. There wasn't beer enough among the dozens for that.

Under protest Jabez opened the cupboard, three of the company leaning the while against the door into the passage. All eyes were turned towards the cupboard but none with eager interest; most of them were eyes seldom lighted with interest and eagerness.

The first opening of the door disclosed what might have seemed an anticlimax to expectation: it showed a shallow space filled with narrow shelves on which a few trumpery articles of household tinware, a broken lantern, four or five empty bottles and a Bible were innocently arrayed: the Bible was for luck.

A young man by the door laughed, and the rest of the company allowed a grunt of mild approval to escape it. Thus encouraged Jabez, with his hands under the topmost shelf, gave it an upward shove, and then lifted out the board to which all the shelves were fixed, and the shelves with it. A much deeper recess was seen within, running back four feet at least and running behind the chimney, too. In this a dozen guns, some nets and a few other trifles of the poacher's art were stored.

"All kerrect?" enquired the man with the lifting eyebrow, peering in over Jabe's shoulder.

"As kerrect," replied Jabez emphatically, "as walkin' to chapel wi' your wedded wife of a Sunday evenin'."

On the other side of the high coach-road, behind the hedge running opposite the inn, five or six feet from the standard sign of the Pheasant (a fine bird measuring a yard and a half from the head to the stump of the tail), three gamekeepers were huddled, not unarmed,

and not unfortified by good liquor. They were warmly clad and well fed, stalwart upstanding fellows when free to stand on their feet. To have decent wages was their good luck, to have enough to eat could hardly be counted to them for unrighteousness: and their calling at that time, when old mad King George had yet but a wretched year or so of life in him, might well be paid even better than it was. It was dangerous enough and hard enough. Two were servants of Lord Wilbury, the third, a younger man, had the small squire of Summer Avon for master, and felt himself associated with his betters. The job he was on was not much against his grain, still he felt that lurking behind a hedge and watching neighbours of his own drawing into a trap gave him a stealthy feeling he could have dispensed with.

"There's twelve gone in," whispered Lord Wilbury's second man, tired of saying nothing, "and the last went in twenty minutes since."

"Bide still," said his chief. "There'll be thirteen. The Baker's dozen they calls theirsens. Baker ben't come yet."

"And they'll not think o' startin' till the Mail's been through," said the youngest keeper.

Almost at the same minute came the noise of the coach, clattering down the hill, the bugle ringing out cheerily; and the sound of a man's footsteps from the lane leading Summerquick way.

The man walked across to the inn and the three keepers cautiously stood up, the hedge being still tall enough to hide them.

"That's Baker," said Lord Wilbury's head keeper.

"And that's the mail," said the other. "Let's show now."

As the coach drew up by the inn door they slipped along to a gap and went across to mix with the little crowd of passengers and guards and stablemen.

Some went in to get drink at the bar, but the three keepers stayed outside, chatting with those who were not thirsty, and keeping the coach between them and the house.

CHAPTER II

“Good gracious!” cried Mary Lamb, “what a noise! Can the house be on fire?”

“I should say not,” said Mr. Hazlitt, coolly, “as everybody seems trying to get into it.”

The lady had run to the window and was dragging back the curtains to get a look out. Tishlite jumped on the table, into the middle of the odd trick, with his tail in the air. Even the fire let drop a large coal with a clatter among the fire-irons.

Downstairs there was enough fuss and clamour to justify Elia in following his sister to the window; and even Parson Strong and Mr. Hazlitt stood up and pushed their chairs back with dignified protest. Doors were banging: women screaming, men shouting; feet trampling, and, what was worse and more uncanny, the mail-horses were squealing like wounded hares.

“For God’s sake shut the door,” one voice cried in terrified tones.

“For God’s sake don’t,” more than one other voice entreated. “Let us in, don’t shut us out . . . to be ate alive. Ah — for mercy’s sake open it.”

Was all this distraction caused by the gamekeepers? Had they raided the taproom, and was the scuffle and clamour the result of it? No, for the keepers were still outside where they would much rather not have been.

Behind the window curtains of Mr. Hazlitt’s parlour was a stand of plants and ferns, behind them a blind that would not easily go up: when Mary Lamb had got it lifted and her own nose against the glass she

could see pretty well, for a tall lamp stood a couple of yards from the inn door close to where the mail had drawn up.

Elia could see nothing but the back of his sister's head.

"Heavens!" she cried in the voice of a lady who would faint if she had not something better to do looking. "It's a lion!"

"Nonsense," said her brother with a funny glance at Hazlitt. "He never left the room."

"Oh! Oh!" screamed the lady. "It's on the horses' backs, tearing at them. . . ."

And with that she let go the blind, and fell back as if with a mind to faint in right earnest.

All three gentlemen were now at the window, the stand of plants was pulled aside, the blind dragged clean down, and they could see that sure enough, she had made no mistake, unlikely a fable as her tale sounded.

The four horses, still harnessed to the coach, were in a wild confusion, dragging hither and thither; on the back of one, her talons deeply dug into its quivering flesh, a huge lioness was crouching, with a horrid mumbling noise, tearing at the poor, terrified beast, and biting at it ferociously with her sharp, white, gleaming teeth. An oldish passenger, stout and ill to move, had kept his place on the driver's seat, warmly wrapped up in rugs and shawls in which, as he now made despairing efforts to get loose, he seemed fairly entangled. After half a dozen desperate struggles he succeeded so far as to be free of his trappings. But the ledge for the feet was narrow, he slipped and came down among the kicking hoofs of the horses, just as the lioness, attracted or enraged by his squeals, made a leap at the bundle out of which he tumbled. The horse she had been mauling went down at the same moment,

the blood pouring from horrible wounds; the near leader went down too, his four legs going all ways at once. The off leader broke his traces and went off, helter skelter up the road towards Chalkminster. The lioness, finding nothing to her purpose in the bunch of woollen rugs and wraps she was tearing with savage claws, made a leap towards the shouting group that was struggling at the door — those outside trying to push in, those inside doing all they could to shut the wild beast out.

“For the Lord’s sake let us in,” shouted the one lot.

“Get the door to and bolt it,” shrieked a woman just safe inside. “The lions are rushing at it.”

“There’s three of them.”

“One on the horses’ backs, one devouring the box passenger, and one here — let’s in neighbours.”

“Ay, if Christians. . . .”

One keeper, Lord Wilbury’s elder man, was got inside.

“Why don’t they shoot them?” he called out. He had dropped his gun outside. So had his mate who was outside still.

Squire Damtsey’s keeper was outside too, with his gun still under his arm, but sheer forgotten in flurry and excitement. He was trying to hide behind the trunk of the big tree.

The lioness crouched for a spring, and leapt forward at the tearing mass of folk in front of her, on the back of one of whom she came down with a weight that sent him sprawling on the cobbles.

“Which art in Heaven,” he gasped wishing in his extremity he knew more of it.

’Twas the coachman, a huge bulk of a man, not much lighter than the beast on top of him: luckily it was wintry and a sharp night, and over all his fat and

all his clothes he was wearing a leathern over-coat with three thick caps, through which the animals long talons found it hard to win at the flesh inside.

Squire Dauntsey's keeper saw the lioness spring, and saw the man go down under her. Could he shoot and not kill the coachman? There wasn't much time to reckon chances, and he risked it. Bang went the gun with a noise that sent the squealing horses tearing and scrabbling worse than ever.

"I'm shot," yelled one and tumbling down among the legs of the rest; but he was wrong and his only danger now was that of being trampled to death.

The lioness had nothing to say, but was really shot, and would have rolled off the coachman's back, had not her curled up claws held her fixed to him.

At the noise of the gun some of those farthest inside the door rushed yet further in, scrambling up the stairs and along the narrow passages to right and left, so more room was left for the unlucky ones outside to force an entrance. When all had got in, the fat coachman, prostrate on the cobbles with the dead lioness on his back, had time to wonder if he was dead, too. Squire Dauntsey's keeper, Harry Kite, came out from the shelter of the tree. He felt a shyness of asking the coachman if he had killed him.

"How are you, Mr. Reckitts?" he enquired tentatively — for he had known Mr. Reckitts on the road a year or two.

Mr. Reckitts groaned.

"Not dead, I hope," said Harry, with a still suspicious look at the lioness, and holding his second barrel ready.

"Not yet," murmured the coachman.

Some bolder spirits crept out of the inn.

"Have you killed all three?" asked one, with a cautious look around.

"There never was but one," said Kite. "Come, lend a hand to get Mr. Reckitts up."

It took time. Mr. Reckitts was loath to believe himself alive, altogether unwilling to believe the lioness was dead.

"Out o' the mouths o' babies and sucklings," he murmured, glad to remember a bit of Scripture, and offering it up by way of thanksgiving. For a man who had never been to church for forty years it was, as he felt afterwards, a triumph of memory and native piety.

Once it was clearly ascertained that the lioness was dead there was no end of the courageous curiosity of all who had fled from her. They poured out of the house as eagerly as they had shoved in. One outside passenger, on learning in the flour-bin, where he had found a soft and safe retreat that the beast was dispatched, emerged, and valorously kicked her.

"I'm glad," said Lord Wilbury's keeper, "as young Kite had sense to obey my word of command and shoot the reptile."

"I said at once it should be shot," declared an elderly lady. "'Twas my first word to the landlady when she let me into the bar. I could not understand the delay."

Mr. Reckitts was now the hero, and jealous of attentions to Harry Kite.

"And your wounds?" enquired another passenger. "Where do you feel them worst?"

"Inwardly."

"A mask o' gore under his clothing, he says," explained the elderly lady. "Has anyone got leeches?"

Nobody happened to have leeches, but, if they were required to suck up the blood with which Mr. Reckitts was thus declared to be drenched, their absence was the less to be deplored that he had not a scratch on his body except where a large safety pin had "come un-

done" and inflicted a wound that was by no means alarming.

By this time the extent of the damage done was pretty well known. The lioness had really killed one horse, and seriously torn another, a third had put a shoulder out in slipping to the ground; while the elderly outside passenger who had tumbled among the horses' feet had been kicked and sustained, as the guard reported, "confusions." A stable helper had also been kicked, and limped on a badly bruised shin.

The poachers in the taproom had been for a time forgotten, and it was hardly likely they would stay there throughout the din and fuss; they crept out almost unnoticed and mixed with the crowd that filled the passages. By the time the keepers had leisure to remember them they had themselves become aware of the presence of the keepers, and did not perhaps ascribe it to coincidence. Baker and his dozen unobtrusively left the inn, all except the youngest, and by far the most decent-looking of them. He boldly came up to Harry Kite and congratulated him on his prowess in slaying the lioness.

"I knew you was here," observed the young gamekeeper in a low voice, "and half an hour ago I was sorry for it." He glanced around, and, seeing none of the other friends of Mr. Baker, added cheerfully: "Now it don't matter."

The other young man, who was as tall as Kite himself, but less formed and stalwart, and very much darker, turned a face of innocent enquiry, but only asked how it felt to shoot a lion.

"I'd liever shoot another than have to fire on a friend," answered Kite, in a tone even less audible to anyone who might be disposed to listen to these confidences.

"One *might* be forced to shoot a friend," said the

other, "but . . . well, it wouldn't be the strongest proof of friendship."

His black eyes had a quaint light of laughter in them, and he altogether refused to look like a man who had been warned. He held himself lightly, and walked with a peculiar grace and easiness: none of his movements were like those of the loutish company he had been in before the arrival of the mail and the lioness. His skin was dark, but clean and fresh, his hair nearly black but neither dirty nor neglected. His clothing was really a little better than that of the labourers he had been with and seemed much better: he wore it differently, and one might judge him to be a man not indifferent to his own good looks and well-knit figure. Whether he would grow to seem reckless one could not say, at present he had only the air of being careless. There was something untamed-looking about him, and yet not what commonly is called wild; for he had not the least appearance of being dissipated. His expression was clear and open, though a little defiant and bold.

"There!" said Harry Kite, half impatiently, "you be warned, Hurdcott."

"Warned!" protested Hurdcott with a stare of outraged innocence.

CHAPTER III

"THERE'S a young lady down below," said Mrs. Grately, the landlady of the Hut, "begging your pardon, Miss, and gentlemen, for making so bold; as I thought I'd step up to tell you, please. A young lady as didn't really ought to be standing in the passages amongst all they odd-come-shorts; and where to put her else, while they're settling what to do, I don't rightly know. For the bar's worse, and the tap not likely, and my little kitchen full o' folks, too. Miss Lamb, she's a *regular* lady, not the sort as mostly you sees in the mail. . . ."

Parson Strong had gone down and was still absent. Hazlitt and Elia had come back.

"Bring the young lady up and let her wait here," said the kind-hearted Mary. "—if Mr. Hazlitt will let me say so."

Mr. Hazlitt did not say No, though he cared neither for strangers nor adventures. Charles offered to go and escort the young lady. But his sister said:

"*I'll* go with Mrs. Grately: perhaps she'll come up more willingly."

Presently Mary came back and brought the stranger with her. Hazlitt and Elia saw at once that the landlady had made no mistake as to her being a real lady. She was a young girl, not more than nineteen, but with a dignity and self-possession not universal at her age. Her dress was simple, or seemed so to the gentlemen, who being men, poor things, knew no better: but it was that of a woman of rank, and worn with the grace

of one who had never been ill-attired. Her figure was slight, but rather tall, and she held herself well; her face was remarkable, not only for beauty but for distinction of expression. The complexion was a little pale, but of a singular clear brilliance, and the eyes were very dark, like the finely traced eyebrows and long lashes. Nothing could be finer-chiselled than her nose, or more beautiful than her mouth, though it was not small; the lips were curved and rather full, like Elia's own, and the chin and jaw had something of his expression also.

When she bowed both men felt themselves put on their finest manners; and when she spoke, though it was but a brief phrase of thanks for the courtesy that admitted her, they wished to hear her voice again. She spoke English, and that without effort or inaccuracy, and without foreign accent, but the tones had a richness; the pronunciation a fullness unusual with ordinary English women, who are apt to talk through half-closed teeth, and lips scarce opened.

Mary and the stranger stood just within the door, Mrs. Grately was just outside it.

"I hope not to trouble you for many minutes," said the young lady. "I think I must be near my journey's end. Is it far from here to Summer Avon?"

"Maybe seven miles by road — scarce four over the down," explained the landlady, with a forward curtsy that landed her in the room.

"I could walk four, very easily," said the stranger, "if I knew the way, or had anyone to show it me."

"And be devoured by lions!" cried Mary Lamb, throwing up her hands.

"Nay, Ma'am," protested Mrs. Grately, "lions don't breed on our downs. There's a wild-beast show at Chalkminster, for the fair, and they say this one must ha' scaped from it."

"No doubt," urged Mary, "the wolves have escaped too, and the tigers, and the camels."

"Camels are not commonly addicted to a human diet," Mr. Hazlitt remarked in his disengaged manner.

"And what would that matter," asked Mary, "if the wolves had already devoured. . . ."

"My name is Dauntsey," said the stranger.

"Had devoured Miss Dauntsey!" demanded Mary, completing her sentence.

Miss Dauntsey laughed gently, so did Elia.

"There's a young man below," said the landlady, "as comes from Summer Avon parish, and he'll be going back—he could show the way and proud to do it, if Miss Dauntsey would be pleased to let him. . . . Mary, I saw another Summer Avon man, Harry Kite, the squire's keeper: so, if he was going home as well, the young lady could have the two of them to guide her. . . ."

Miss Lamb still thought such an expedition hazardous; even her brother and Mr. Hazlitt looked doubtful. A four-mile walk over the downs, with only a couple of young countrymen for escort, seemed to them too much of an adventure for such a young lady as their present guest.

"Have you no carriage?" asked Hazlitt of the landlady.

"Yes, Sir, a good enough carriage, but the horse went lame coming back from Chalkminster to-day, or I'd ha' mentioned it sooner."

"I'll walk," said Miss Dauntsey with the manner of a young queen able to make up her mind, and not apt to be moved from what she had decided upon. "I think you said one of these young men was game-keeper to the squire of Summer Avon—is not that Mr. Dauntsey? If so he should be able to show me the way to my uncle's home."

Mrs. Grately went down to enquire for the young men, while Hazlitt and the two Lambs begged their guest to come nearer the fire and warm herself. She drew off a pair of gloves that Mary noted for their excellence — they were made in Palermo, always famous for good gloves and boots — and stretched out to the blaze hands that were worthier of notice than any covering they might have. The fingers were long and slim, tapering to the tips, and on two of them were rings such as Mary Lamb was sure must betoken a lady of quality. The inside of the hands, as she turned them also to the warmth, had a shell-like pink that neither gentleman failed to admire.

“You are courageous!” cried Mary.

Miss Dauntsey laughed again, in her low, gentle manner and said:

“I am proud to be praised, but wish I deserved it better. A four-mile walk in England should not be dangerous. My father has assured me there are no brigands here — we are not in Sicily.”

“You know Sicily?” asked Elia with a quick interest.

“I have always lived there — but I cannot say I know Sicily, for my home has been in Palermo, and I have not travelled much — except on my way here.”

Mrs. Grately came back and said young Kite, the gamekeeper, was already gone: but the other lad would be proud to take Miss Dauntsey to her uncle’s house, if she would accept his service. Mary almost wondered that her brother and Mr. Hazlitt did not offer theirs also: but neither did so, and Miss Dauntsey prepared to go without delay.

She thanked them for their kind welcome and gave each gentleman a very graceful bow, and dropped such a curtsy to the lady as she had supposed was only

accorded to royalty: then turned to follow the landlady down the narrow stairs.

"It can't be right," cried Mary when the door was shut, "for her to go along at such an hour so great a distance."

"It can't be wrong," said Elia, "or she would not do it."

"My word!" ejaculated his sister.

"It was kind in her to go so soon," said her brother, "before we were all in love with her."

"Perhaps she scarce went soon enough," declared Miss Mary.

Tishlite and Mr. Hazlitt yawned together, the former with sincerity.

At the stair-foot Hurdcott stood waiting. He doffed his cap when he saw the lady, and, as the lamp-light fell on his upturned face, she noted all in it that was unlike a loutish yokel. To the young gamekeeper his tone had been somewhat pert; in his manner now was nothing but a deference that was half shy, yet wholly free from awkwardness. That he was handsome no one could fail to see, but Miss Dauntsey was more struck by himself than by his features.

"It is good of you," she said, "to be at the trouble of leading me to my uncle's."

She thanked him just as she would have thanked a gentleman of her own rank for such a service; and he answered, just as a gentleman might, but with a plainer courtesy than some in higher station might have been able to show.

The lady's baggage was to be sent for on the morrow, but with her wraps and a small hand valise he burdened himself, not at all as though they were a burden.

Mrs. Grately saw them off with bustling deference, and well-disguised impatience for there was business

for her in the bar — and Mr. Hazlitt's supper still to dress. Out of the inn door Hurdcott and his charge turned to the right, keeping to the road for some three furlongs, then leaving it for a track that was even then scarce a lane. The young man walked at first behind, and seemed to take for granted that he must not obtrude his talk upon the lady. But one who shows the way goes best before, and, with a word of apology, he presently moved in front; he had no lantern, and they needed none, for the moon was now up. The dusk had fallen thick and murky, with a threat of snow; the wind, however, had now gone up, as we say on the plain, that is into the north, and the clouds had driven southward leaving a clear cold sky for frost.

So far in England Miss Dauntsey had seen no region so empty of human life. Not a dwelling showed, nor the light from any.

The track plunged into a belt of wood with trees on either hand, and being Scotch pines, they let little light through.

"'Tis but a belt," said Hurdcott; "we shall be through into the moonlight in five minutes."

His apology was only for the rough road, unlighted; he was not thinking she could be afraid of him. He knew she was a lady, and he only a peasant; it did not simply occur to him that she should be embarrassed. Nor was she.

Presently she almost stumbled on a loose stone, and he drew up instantly. He shifted all her belongings to his hand and arm, and held his right hand out to her in the dark.

"Let me lead you," he said. "It's a rough track and rutty."

She took the hand he gave her, and they went forward for five minutes side by side. She felt that he was not merely guiding but supporting her. He did

not clutch her hand with awkward roughness, but she could feel how strong he was.

Then they came out into the down where were no more trees and he dropped her hand at once.

"It'll be all moonlight now," he said, moving a step ahead of her.

But this teased her.

"Let me walk beside you," she begged. "It makes me feel tired — as if I were trying to keep up with you — to walk behind."

Immediately he fell back, suiting his pace exactly to hers.

"I thought it was right to go in front and behind," he explained, "and you do not know the way."

There seemed indeed no particular path, for he was leading her, by a crow line, straight across the down. Though he now walked at her side, he made no attempt to talk, only answering when she spoke to him.

Once, indeed, he asked her, with a most manly thoughtfulness if his pace was too rapid.

"I am used to walk quick," he said, "and never walked with a lady yet. In these parts they do not use to walk much."

"Nor in Sicily — but I like walking. Perhaps I make you walk very slow."

This he disclaimed, and with entire sincerity. He would have liked the walk to last all night. That he certainly did not say, however; nor did he make the slightest effort to prolong their journey. Only he would be loath to tire her by going too quick. On the whole they talked little. Hurdcott was proud of the strange chance that had given him to her for guide, and knew that somehow this night's privilege would change him.

Already he was ashamed of himself: of being what he was, what he had been. The empty downs, under the

serene chill light of the moon, spoke to him with a voice he had never before heard; and in their silent loveliness reproached him. Of that which we discern as life they were void, and yet life now first began to reveal itself to him, as he, mute like them, walked beside the lady who had trusted herself, nobly as he thought, to his leading.

Till now life had meant nothing for him but a trivial succession of objectless labour and mean pleasures; a silly seeking for excitement that had never stirred the surface even of his existence: a heedless passing of time, that he, like his betters, had called killing it, whereas he suddenly divined that it would kill him and survive him.

He perceived that life has a noble meaning, an inexorable purpose. The significance he could by no means yet fathom, the purpose he must learn. Without warning, or preface, he found himself face to face with a mystery he had never suspected, and wrapped almost in a silken mesh that he would not believe tangled.

Well might the lady, silent like himself who paced trustfully beside him, have recognized in a flash, at the first sight of his face, upturned to her as she came down the stair in the inn, something rare and fine. She had been in England scarce two days and he was the first man she had seen there who had wakened in her a special interest, though it was her nature to be interested in all her fellow creatures. Up to the present it had seemed to her that the Sicilians she had known all her life were more interesting than the English through whom she had but passed, as one moves through a crowd. For she had got glimpses of fewer varieties of type, seen faces less legible, with characteristics more blurred.

Hurdcott was unlike anyone she had met. She had

known Sicilian lads of the poorest class with as fine manners, but what was remarkable in this silent young man appeared to her to lie deeper than manner: it was something more inward and significant, not mere singularity of characteristic but something special and uncommon in actual character.

Each of them divined in the other something greater than what could be seen, a something not summed up in the total of what could be noted or described.

That his chance meeting with her was a turning point for him he knew without knowing why: and he did not attribute the effect produced to anything he could state to himself as cause. He had been conscious that she was beautiful rather than aware of her beauty, and he did not perceive that her beauty had anything to do with him. It was her affair not his. That she was of a rank and distinction outside his narrow experience he also felt, but to rank and distinction, as he had never thought of them, he attached no ideas, and, standing alone, they could have affected him very little. Her manner was more striking to him than any personal graces of form or face; civility and condescension he might have expected in return for his service to her, reserve instead would not have offended him — for he had no criticism, and did not know what to look for. But there was neither reserve nor condescension, he imagined, by a true instinct, that she bore herself to him as she would have done had their rank been equal. Not that she perversely ignored rank, but that she simply was free from the consciousness of it.

CHAPTER IV

“THERE!” cried Squire Dauntsey’s elder sister, “if it isn’t Lady Caradoc, coming to call, and us all of a caddle and no fire in the drawing-room.”

She was sitting by the window nearest the door, with a shirt of her brother’s that she was mending, none too soon, in her lap. Miss Amelia was at the other window, sorting flower-seeds into paper packets.

“No, she’s gone by — with a little basket on her arm,” Miss Priscilla added almost before she had time to crumple up the shirt into a bundle and prick herself with the needle.

“To be sure, Amelia, you’ve not got a broken leg, nor yet consumption, so far as I’ve heard you mention it; and I go to church on Sundays — what would Lady Caradoc want with us!”

Miss Amelia Dauntsey was full ten years younger than her sister, and her tongue was at least twenty times sharper. Miss Priscilla’s tongue was not, in fact, sharp at all. She used it sparingly, and mostly spoke in small mousy tones, as if she had hardly made up her mind to say anything. Her hair was not abundant, and had long been gray. Her face was gray too, and she looked delicate. Amelia was as strong as a horse, and had a healthy brown complexion with bright dark eyes, and a nose with a tilt that matched their quick, alert expression. She made one think of a terrier, whereas Miss Priscilla was like a gentle pussy, of unpredatory habits, who preferred purring a little by the fire to pouncing on inexperienced young birds or venturesome mice.

"I'm sure," murmured Miss Dauntsey, "she's very kind to the poor."

"I am saying so — And if you wanted a bit of cold pudding she'd bring it you: and if I had a husband who drank she'd give him a talking to for me."

Miss Amelia looked very capable of correcting such a hypothetic husband on her own account. Of course she was free from any incumbrance of the kind. She had always refused "to be bothered with one." What she liked was flowers, and the only men she saw much use in were gardeners, or such farm-hands as she could get hold of, to her brother's disgust, to serve her instead. She liked old Laban the nominal gardener, though she never let him call his soul his own, and was kind to him in a bracing fashion of her own. She paid him his wages out of her own pin-money, and was suspected by her sister of giving him eggs; never a pig was killed "in house" but Laban got his bit of pork, as well as black-puddings and other weird et ceteras, such as chitterlings.

Squire Dauntsey had a most manly scorn of flowers, and waged futile war with Amelia over her constant efforts to borrow men from the farm to work under her in the garden. But in such warfare he had but a poor chance, for he was no match for Amelia in trenchancy of speech, and if he swore his sister would flash her black eyes at him and say:

"There! Athelstan! If I were a man I'd swear you over the wall with not a breath left in you. Such new swears as you'd hear — they'd make you dizzy. Only it's not becoming: nor it isn't in you either. I'd knock it off if I was you — it's poor work being second best, and Willie Compton the carter could swear you down in five minutes if he was a gentleman and was free to do it."

Squire Dauntsey was a bit younger than Priscilla,

but a good deal older than Amelia: he wasn't much like either of them, but leant to the gray colourless type of his elder sister. There had been another brother, Alured, dark like Amelia, but otherwise quite unlike any of them. If alive now he would be, perhaps, fifty years of age: but he was dead, and thirty out of those fifty years he had spent out of England, as His Brittanine Consul General for Sicily. He had been the pet and darling of his mother, who sent him to Sherborne school out of her own money, and thence for a year or two to Oxford, after which he had gone abroad. The Dauntseys had been biggish people once in those parts, and still owned Summer Avon and part of the next parish, Bostock, but had dwindled down, without objecting to it, and were quite content now to be forgotten by the fine folk of the county. Miss Dauntsey minded her house, and Miss Amelia minded her garden, the squire farmed all his own land, and they supposed themselves to be as happy as need be.

It was latish in the afternoon when Lady Caradoc went by with her little basket, the afternoon of the day on which some hours later the lioness pounced on the Mail at the Hut. It was soon too dark to darn shirts or sort garden seeds, so the two ladies left their seats by the windows, and drew up to the fire.

Miss Priscilla heaved a small sigh as she turned back her meek black gown over her knees. It had a narrow hem of crape, for their brother Alured was only dead three months. She thought of him as a very handsome lad of twenty, light-hearted and full of life.

Amelia understood, and sighed for company, though her memory of their brother was vaguer, for she had been a child when he went away.

"I wonder what she'll be like," she remarked in the friendly hope of suggesting more cheerful thoughts.

"I hope she'll not mind being here," said Priscilla in her weak, unsanguine voice.

"Why should she mind? We're her nearest relations."

Miss Dauntsey shook her head. She was used to disappointments: as sure as she set a hen on a special batch of eggs the hen forsook them, or, if they hatched out, the rats or the fox would get the chickens. Amelia's seeds always came up and did well.

"I doubt we'll seem strange to her, though — foreigners as you may say."

"Us foreigners! If anyone's foreign it's her. But why should she be foreign? Isn't she Wred's daughter?"

"But her mama was a Sicilian lady — and she's lived there all her life."

"Well, they can't be so much wrapped in her or they'd make her stop there."

"Perhaps it was what they wanted: but Wred's wishes were for her to come to us . . . I hope she won't mind coming."

Amelia poked the fire with significance.

"Not if she has any sense, and why should she not? You always say how clever her father was."

"Yes, clever . . ." admitted Miss Priscilla, as if uncertain whether cleverness and sense were quite the same.

"Certainly," said Amelia, "he might have done something more sensible than marrying a Sicilian."

"He was terribly wrapped up in her, Mealy, anyone could see that by his letters."

Mealy was a funny family-name for the younger Miss Dauntsey: nothing could look less mealy.

"It's a long way from Sicily," she observed. "I wonder how long it takes. Could you come all the way in a ship — to Southampton, do you think?"

Miss Priscilla was a little fluttered by this appeal to her geography. She sighed again and shook her head.

"The sea's very dangerous," she said. "I hope she'll not come that way. I'm sure I've thought of it when I was saying my prayers every stormy night since her letter came, in case she should have made up her mind to travel that way: they say it comes cheaper than overland."

Amelia with her robust health, and vigorous temperament, was not subject to her sister's nervous apprehensions, and felt herself behindhand in sensibility—at a time when sensibility was much esteemed by ladies. Their mother, whom Amelia remembered as the perfection of gentle breeding and refinement, had been all nerves and tremors. Old Mrs. Dauntsey never thought twice about fainting if she saw a mouse, whereas Amelia, if a rat were rash enough to cross her path, would end his illicit career with an adroitly aimed blow of stick or stone.

"I do trust," murmured Miss Priscilla, "that our niece is not—not—not a Roman Catholic."

"A Roman Catholic!" cried Amelia with a start. "What on earth could put such a notion as that in your head Scilla? Wred was a Protestant."

"Well, he never cared much for religion. . . ."

"I'm not a Catholic, I suppose, nor Athelstan. . . ."

"No, my dear. But you see he married one."

This seemed almost a new idea to Amelia.

"I never heard it mentioned," she protested.

"All the Sicilians are Catholics, I doubt. And, if Wred didn't mind marrying one, perhaps he wouldn't interfere with the mother; and naturally she'd like to breed up her child in her own way. How could she teach her her prayers, else?"

Miss Priscilla was very pious, and Amelia put it down partly to her poor health. She did not affect much in that way herself, though of course she went to church on Sunday, as did Athelstan, except perhaps in lambing time. But the idea of their niece being a Catholic took Amelia aback altogether. It surprised her that Priscilla did not seem more shocked.

"Well, she can't be a Catholic *here* anyway," she said. "There never *was* any in our family: and there's no Catholic chapel hereabouts, not even at Chalkminster; that's lucky."

"There's one out Tishy way. Lord Wardon's a Catholic."

"But that's twenty miles off. . . . Anyway a little girl like her'll do what her uncle and aunts tell her. . . ."

"She must be nineteen now. She was born in the last year of the old century."

Priscilla had an unerring memory for dates of births, and marriages and deaths. She could always remember when anyone died, and was often surprised to see a widow imagining herself to have been one eighteen months when it was barely twelve.

"I wish," said Amelia, "she'd get here by Christmas: 'twould be a bit of liveliness to begin with. We're quiet enough in general."

Miss Dauntsey tried, ineffectually, not to sigh again.

"I doubt our Christmas doings will seem but rough to her," she murmured. "Alured had always high notions, and he'll have brought her up high, you may depend upon it. This Palermo, by what I could understand, is a big place with a King and Queen and that, and Alured was in the thick of it all. It was just what would suit him. He took to big people, and they to him, always. His wife's mother was something at Court. And he'd talk of Dukes and

Duchesses, in his letters, as free and easy as you'd talk of the dairyman."

"I'm sure," said Amelia, "it's seldom I mention the dairyman. There's not much to say about him. He's over fond of the beer. But so most of them are."

On the whole she was not much delighted by the ideas concerning their niece which this talk with her sister had suggested to her. A foreigner and a Roman Catholic with high notions!

The door opened and their brother came in.

"Well, girls," he said, coming to the fire and stretching out his feet to warm them.

"Well, Athelstan."

Squire Dauntsey was a bachelor, but was no longer young and had never been exactly gay. Perhaps he had been smart as a youth; he was not at all smart now. He lived on the land and by it, and all his thoughts were of it. He wore clothes to keep himself warm, and because people do wear them: to owe anything to them had never, for five and twenty years, occurred to him. His dress was old and had been rough when it was new: to most people, Amelia included, his manner was rough, too. But to his mother and Priscilla he had ever been gentle. He knew how to talk like a gentleman, but in general he spoke in the broad Chalkshire dialect, originally out of caprice, now from long habit. Except for farming he cared for nothing but sport.

He had never been a pretty sprig of a fellow like Alured, or thrown himself in the way of big people: anyone would say he rated himself no higher than a farmer. Nevertheless, he remembered fully that the Dauntseys had owned Summer Avon since King Stephen's time, and had for centuries owned half a dozen parishes besides. He knew that formerly they had married daughters of knights and nobles, and had never yet

married vulgarly. His father had been nearly as poor a squire as himself, and of no more account among the fine folk of the county, but his mother had come of a family as old as their own, though but little wealthier, and had more quarterings in her coat of arms than there were rooms in the Manor House. All this he remembered, but silently, and though not forgotten it was not often thought of. His thoughts were of the land and how to force a living out of it.

CHAPTER V

BETWEEN eight and nine o'clock Squire Dauntsey and his sisters were at supper, in the oak panelled dining-room whose two tall windows looked on the road. But the shutters were now shut and the curtains drawn.

The Squire was still in the mud-stained clothes he had been wearing all day. It was not his shaving day and he was rather bristly about the chin and cheeks. When bed-time came he would administer a brotherly, but scrappy, salute to his sisters.

There came a knock at the front door, and the two ladies looked at one another wonderingly. Visitors were few and, at this late hour, almost unknown.

"Is that the front-door?" demanded the cook in the kitchen.

"Whoever can it be at this time o' night?" marvelled the housemaid.

"If Squire was a doctor, like my last place," said Jane, who was not cook, nor housemaid, and did not exactly know what she was, "I should say 'twas some-one took worse."

This idea was not severely scouted by Miriam or Jemima who had none of their own to suggest as an alternative.

"Maybe," said the dairymaid, "Laban Smith's wife's got her spasms again and he's come to ask Miss Mealy to send some brandy for her."

"He'd niver think to come to the front door," protested the cook.

"Not likely," said the housemaid who couldn't see

what Lijah Rowden saw in the dairymaid, to whom he was engaged.

The knock was repeated and Miss Amelia came out to know why no one went to "answer the door."

"We were wondering who in goodness it could ever be," explained the housemaid.

"We shall never know till someone goes to see," said Miss Amelia with lucidity. She went back to the dining-room and Jemima went to the front door.

After an interval of unchaining and unbolting she showed herself in the dining-room.

"It's young Hurdcott," she said, "and a lady: as has walked o'er the downs from the Hut. He says she's Miss Dauntsey, Squire's niece, come from abroad in the Mail-coach."

Squire Dauntsey dropped his fork with a large lump of meat on it ready to go into his mouth. Miss Priscilla's pale face turned quite pink, and Amelia, who hadn't had time to sit down again said:

"There! How things happen — just as we were talking of her."

This the Squire could not understand, for no one had mentioned his niece to him since he came in. But he got up, and made haste to the door, and his sisters followed him.

Outside in the moonlight, at the foot of the rather steep flight of stone steps, the young traveller stood waiting while Hurdcott had gone up and knocked. Her uncle's house was in the middle of the village fronting the road, above which it stood up tall and somewhat gaunt in the cold light. By day it was of a mellow red with gray stone doorway and window places, and a gray stone pediment with the Dauntsey arms on a large escutcheon under the peak. Now in the moonlight it looked black and white. Seven or eight feet from the door was a fine old wrought-iron gate hung

between stone pillars, and set in a low wall of lichen-crusted brick coped with stone, having stone balls, like huge cannon-balls, at intervals.

To the right ran a much higher wall of rubble, thatched at the top, behind which was Miss Amelia's garden. Opposite was an orchard, which had been a pleasance once, running down to the river.

The shutters being closed no light shone out of the Manor House, which gave it a less friendly look than the cottages they had been passing since they entered the village.

After Hurdcott's first knock nothing happened, and Consuelo, who really hardly knew what time it might be, began to wonder if her uncle's family had gone to bed. Then Hurdcott knocked again: he did not think they had gone to bed, but he felt a sort of impatience with them for not being quicker to show their welcome of the kinswoman who had come so far to make her home with them. For she had by this time told him so much about herself, that she was the daughter of Squire Dauntsey's brother, and was come from Sicily to stay with them altogether.

It seemed to Hurdcott that every window should glow with welcome and the door fly open to admit her at the first signal.

It did open at last, after some rattling of a chain and creaking of bolts: then he told the staring housemaid whom he had been escorting. He drew back and went down the steps to beg Miss Dauntsey to go up. Suddenly she felt shy, and it was a new experience. She had written from London, but was now sure that her letter could not have arrived — as a matter of fact it had come down in the Mail with her and was by this time at Chalkminster. Evidently her coming was not expected. She had not felt shy in Mr. Hazlitt's parlour at the Hut, nor afterwards when walking over

the silent downs with Hurdcott, whom she seemed to have known already a long time.

Presently Squire Dauntsey hurried out, with a confused expectation of finding a little girl waiting to be welcomed: he saw a lady taller than himself. His original intention of bestowing an avuncular embrace quite forsook him, and he felt rather familiar in offering his hand as he called out.

"Come in, come in, my dear; you're welcome, very welcome. Now, girls, don't let her stand outside here. . . ." And he hustlingly led the way up the steps into the hall where Jemima was standing with a fluttering lamp held up in her hand. But Miss Priscilla fluttered more than the lamp, and Miss Amelia was hurriedly remembering the new niece's "high" bringing up. The first glimpse of Consuelo somewhat deepened Aunt Mealy's apprehension.

"Scilla's right," she thought. "She's been brought up 'high' for sure. I wish I'd on my black tabinet."

All three ladies were in mourning, but there was nothing dismal about the girl's dress; the colour hardly struck one; what her aunts with feminine instinct noted instantly was its make, and material, its air of distinction and fashion. Priscilla had said that their brother lived among fine people, and Amelia was at once convinced that his daughter had all her life been accustomed to no other company.

But in the light of the dining-room one could note other things than the outline of a figure, the general effect of a costume, the manner of movement. And good-natured Amelia was immediately proud of her beautiful niece. The healthy breezes of the plain are apt to give to those who dwell on it a bright colour, and certainly Consuelo was too pale; but her aunt at once decided that it was the only drawback to the girl's beauty. Amelia's own eyes were dark, but such

dark eyes as Consuelo's she had never seen, nor such a nose or such a mouth.

Priscilla was reaching up to kiss her brother's daughter, half tearfully, but with the dawning of a new, delightful feeling in her gentle heart: the blissful first sense of mothering something. Hitherto no strong demand had ever been made on her affections. Of her father she had been fond in a meek, unmoved fashion: of her mother she had been proud, but deeply in awe. In more congenial circumstances Mrs. Dauntsey would have been a great lady. As it was, she had ruled autocratically, and with a somewhat chilly air of aloofness and superiority. Alured she had loved and spoiled; when he went away, she bade him go and outgrow the narrow circle and meagre opportunities of his home. He had gone smiling, and she had smiled too, but thereafter her smile was colder, and, young as she still was, her little sum of happiness lay behind her: the rest of her life was given, outwardly to managing her husband and his other children, inwardly and really to remember the one child she could not spare, and had made herself spare — for his profit, as she meant it. Mrs. Dauntsey was a woman to whom pride in something was a condition of existence. At first she had been proud of her own beauty, then of Alured, his fine figure and good looks, his air of breeding and distinction. There was in her position at Summer Avon nothing to feed her pride: it must look for nourishment to her hopes for her son. Had she kept him by her side he could have done nothing, been nothing but the younger son of a small squire of the plains. So she sent him away, and waited for him to revive the lustre of his name, and of his own good blood and hers.

Alured had no objection: he took himself, without

much consideration, at his mother's valuation, and was quite ready to be distinguished. He was clever enough, but without talents of any remarkable sort, and rather vain than ambitious. Besides, he was indolent, and more willing to accept the favours of Fate than to woo them arduously. He became British Consul-General for Sicily, and contrived to live at Palermo among the best society of the gay little capital: and finally he married the daughter of a Palermitan noble, who had five others. But Mrs. Dauntsey had not time to see these moderate successes: when she died he was still Vice-Consul at Catania, and his future bride was learning to be accomplished in the Convent of Orsoline at Monreale.

Priscilla had been treated with a cool tolerance by her handsome mother: Athelstan and Amelia were fonder of her, but had never stood particularly in need of her, or made her into the second mother that an elder sister often becomes.

Now, as she lifted her gentle and mousy little gray face to kiss Wred's daughter she felt, with a thrill of joy never known before, that God had sent her something to love in a new fashion; and Consuelo, bending her lovely head, had an instinct of the meek tenderness offered her, and accepted it with sincerity and a generous gratitude.

As the girl turned to greet her other aunt her beauty seemed more beautiful than ever. Squire Dauntsey looked on, full of good will, but chiefly over-awed. He could hardly believe this wonderful creature was his brother's daughter, that he was her uncle.

Amelia kissed her, vigorously, and Athelstan almost wondered how she could do it.

"Now, Athelstan, bid her welcome!" said Aunt Mealy. "Don't let her feel a stranger," and she gave

him a little tug to bring him within arm's length. But the Squire bethought him of his unshaven chin, and held back shyly.

"Athelstan isn't used to kissing young ladies," laughed Amelia.

Consuelo laughed, too.

"Does he expect *them* to kiss *him*?" she asked.

Squire Dauntsey blushed, and backed a step.

"Oh, well!" the girl said, still laughing, "I mustn't give him the notion that Sicilian young ladies are too bold."

The Squire made a forward lunge, and Consuelo underwent a brief but sensible rasping on her cheek.

Then they all laughed together.

"But how ever did you come?" cried Priscilla, having now had time to realize the full strangeness of the circumstances.

"I came by the mail-coach to an inn called the Pheasant, and from that place I walked here over the downs."

"Over the downs! And how could you find the way?"

"A young man they called Hurdcott showed me the way."

"Hurdcott! Why, that's the young fellow you say's in with all the poachers," cried Amelia to her brother.

Squire Dauntsey had, naturally, a poor opinion of Hurdcott, and could hardly think his niece fortunate in her escort. But the fellow had brought her safe home, and, rough as he might look, Athelstan was a gentleman. He hurried off to give the lad five shillings. But Hurdcott was gone: and nothing all the squires in Chalkshire could have said would have induced him to take a present for showing Miss Dauntsey the way to her uncle's house.

CHAPTER VI

AFTER her walk and her long journey Consuelo was hungry, and ate her supper with an appetite that endeared her to the Squire.

"My dear," he said, "it's wrong in me, but I don't really know your christened name."

"My name," she told him, "is Consuelo."

Aunt Amelia tried not to exchange looks with Priscilla: the name had certainly an outlandish, popish sound.

"Ah!" said the Squire. "An Italian name, no doubt."

"No," the girl answered. "It is Spanish. My mother's family came originally from Spain; the first of them in Sicily was Vice-roy during the Spanish rule. It was my mother's name. But they had taken for granted I should be a boy, and I was to be called Athelstan after my grandfather. When I turned up I was only a girl and my mother begged that I should have her name, for her father was just dead, and she was very sorrowful, and Consuelo means Consolation."

"That was very pretty," murmured Aunt Priscilla.

"And," asked the Squire cautiously, "did your father always call you — nothing for short like?"

"No, he called me Consuelo. You see my mother died when I was little, so there was no other Consuelo."

("No other Consolation," thought Priscilla, with one of her little noiseless sighs.)

"But the other girls at the Convent called me all sorts of things — Consola, and Lola and Soletta. And

nicknames too, such as Merlotta, because of a trick I had of whistling: Merlotta means young blackbird."

None of these names seemed to Squire Dauntsey likely to help him much. He could not believe he should ever "get his tongue round," any of them. Amelia, however, had caught the shortest of them, and thought Lola might not be altogether impracticable. All three of the relations had been struck by the allusion to the convent. The Squire had a hazy idea that perhaps all young ladies in Catholic countries had to be nuns for a time. If that were so, his niece had evidently got it over early.

The aunts were more disagreeably impressed. They thought it clear as noonday that Consuelo had been bred up in her mother's faith. Fortunately they had other matters to withdraw their minds from the subject for the moment. There was their guest's room to be thought of. Presently they slipped away to discuss it.

"It must be the best bedroom, of course," they agreed.

But in the best bedroom, which no one had used for years, Amelia had a perfect storehouse of seeds and bulbs in paper bags, and "slips" in little flower-pots filling up all the broad window sills. They must be moved, but no one could be trusted to move them except herself: meanwhile, Jemima lighted the fire, which at first filled the room with smoke, till it was remembered that the chimney had been stuffed with a sack of sorts. Jemima and Jane enjoyed it all vastly: so much running up and downstairs gave a most exhilarating feeling of liveliness and animation. They were not absolutely inaudible, for Jemima's shoes were apt to fall off, and the polished oak stairs were uncarpeted.

"These shoes," she explained, "be that loose, it do make 'em clacketty."

And Jane, delighted at the lucky augur, tumbled upstairs with the coal-box.

Miriam was by no means disposed to dispense herself from sharing in this pleasant bustle on the narrow ground of being cook; the blankets and sheets having to be aired at her fire, she felt bound to bring them up, though the "young ladies"—Miss Priscilla and Miss Amelia—would allow no one but themselves to make the bed. The sheets were the finest hemstitched, which had never been put on any bed since Mrs. Dauntsey died.

"If it was me," declared Amelia, "I'd rather have the twill. You lie warmer in 'em."

"P'r'aps they'll strike chill," suggested Miriam; "better give 'em a turn o' the warmin' pan."

Jane sped downstairs for it, and returned wonderfully quick. Jemima, determined to do something, wrested it from her, and thrust it up and down in all directions between the sheets.

"There! That'll make it as cosy as a batch o' bread in a hoven," she declared, and Miss Priscilla pushed in a hand to feel.

"It doesn't glow as warm as you'd think," she said, with a disappointed air.

Miss Amelia seized the warming-pan.

"If the silly thing didn't forget to put the hot cinders in!" she cried, with a withering glance of her black eyes at the guilty, but half-giggling Jane.

Downstairs Consuelo and her uncle were getting on excellently.

"What do you do after supper—when wandering nieces don't come knocking at your door at dead of night?" she had asked him.

He was standing by the fire with an unoccupied air that was not lost on her.

"I mostly go to bed."

“Immediately?”

“Well, no, not immediately.”

“What first?”

Uncle Athelstan looked shy.

“I have a smoke,” he confessed, wondering if smoking was held ungenteel in Sicilian circles. “And,” he added ingenuously, “a bit of a drink — in general.”

Consuelo demanded where the means to these comforts were: and insisted on his doing both at once.

“I mostly do it in there,” he told her, nodding to a door in a corner that looked like that of a cupboard: but it led down three steps into the “Office,” so called for no explicable reason, a small panelled room, hung with sporting pictures of an antiquity by no means hoar: smoke and successive layers of varnish had reduced them to a pretty uniform brown.

It would be hard to say why the “office” was originally esteemed more comfortable than the dining-room: but, being so considered, it was more lived in, and therefore really had somehow acquired a sort of ramshackle easiness and comfortableness. The furniture was probably not older, but it was much more worn; the carpet had little of the original colours left, but it was still thick and soft to the feet, having started in life as first-rate Turkey. Draughts from the door into the back hall were kept off by a screen, nearly as tall as the room, of black and yellow lacquer, really a treasure of Japanese art. Against the wall was a sofa whose lines might have been carried out in marble.

Here the aunts found Consuelo and their brother when at last they were able to come down and announce that the girl’s room was ready. They were almost scandalized to find her there, but glad too, for she was evidently quite at home, and had made her uncle feel as much so as though no stranger had broken in on his long-established habits.

Priscilla and Amelia had enjoyed their exertion upstairs nearly as much as the maids: it was pleasant to be doing something hospitable — nothing chills a house like the long disuse of hospitality. And Amelia liked the sense of putting herself a bit “out of the way” to do honour to her niece’s arrival. A worse-tempered woman might have felt it a grievance to have to dislodge all her bulbs and seeds, her slips and flower-pots; she found the small sacrifice a kind of oiling of the rusting wheels of life.

It pleased both sisters to see how Athelstan had “taken to the girl.” It would have been uncomfortable if her coming had put him out.

He was still a bit shy. But, as Consuelo did not seem to be in the least aware of it, and had entirely got over her own brief chill of shyness, he was very quickly forgetting his.

He was not at all like his mother or brother, and had none of the pride that had spoiled Mrs. Dauntsey’s life: but he was quite able to be proud of finding himself the host and protector of this beautiful girl. He was not a dull man, though his existence was dull and laborious, and he knew well enough that the surroundings she had been reared among were not like these into which she had dropped. Had she seemed conscious of it herself, he might have been awkward and half surly: but he perceived that she was a lady, not a fine lady, and was without the remotest taint of feeling herself too smart for her company. In his heart he told himself that she was made of better stuff than her father; and he was quite ready to allow a superior share in her to her Sicilian mother.

Of course she told him about the lion at the Hut, and of course she had to tell it all over again when the aunts came down. They were not London ladies like Mary Lamb, but they were as full of astonishment at

her courage in setting off over the downs on a four-mile walk after such a fright.

"I should have expected Summerquick belt to be full of lions," Amelia confessed — and she was not, in general, nervous.

Aunt Priscilla trembled, and was inwardly convinced that she should dream of lions all night.

"If it had been me," she said, "I should have made Mrs. Grately give me a bed at the Hut, and come on in the morning."

"Lions bite all day," Uncle Athelstan reminded her.

"I wanted to get home," said Consuelo: which Priscilla thought very pretty.

Squire Dauntsey did not forget to say his prayers when he went to bed.

"God bless father and mother and my little brother," he begged, using the formula he had learned from Mrs. Dauntsey over fifty years ago, and quite unconscious of falling into the popish heresy of praying for the dead — "and my sisters. And . . ." — it was a pity he couldn't get his tongue round her name — "and my new niece. And let her like being at home. And make us good to her. Amen. And make me knock off swearing — or don't let it pop out when she's by. Amen."

Aunt Priscilla's prayers were longer, but Consuelo figured just as large in them, and, as it turned out, she did not dream about lions, but only of the orphan daughter of her mother's favourite son.

Consuelo prayed, too: the prayer her own mother had taught her long ago. But first she sat a little while by the red fire in her room, thinking of Palermo far away in the South, that seemed already faded into a picture. Outside the vigorous north wind blew, but its whistle in the chimney did not sound unfriendly. Nor was she lonely: she had none of her father's light and

careless estimate of what was plain and homely: there had been no great demonstration of welcome, none of the shallow parade of it that is so easy and so unconvincing. But she had felt herself welcome, and that is better than being elaborately assured of it. There was not much to remind her of her father in these new-found relations, but they could be dear for his sake all the same, and it seemed to her that it must be her fault if she did not soon love them for their own. She could not guess how the depth and sweetness of her nature had already deepened and sweetened theirs, or at least called up something from affections that had shallowed.

She would have been a cold-hearted girl if she could yet think of Palermo without regrets: there lay all her sunny brief memories: there her first sorrows had come to her: there were all her friends of childhood and girlhood. But warm hearts need not be morbid or cowardly; and her nature was healthy and hopeful. Since England was to be her home she would love it loyally.

CHAPTER VII

AUNT AMELIA's great fear had been that the city-bred girl would find her new life dull. Here were no parties, no drives and ridings with gay and smart companions: here there was, indeed, no society. But Consuelo was never dull: and perhaps she had not cared so much for the rather trivial bustle and movement of Palermo as her aunt took for granted. Here at least everything was fresh and new, and Consuelo set about appreciating all the small things that go to make up one's surroundings, with a zest that none of her relations could quite understand, however gladly they might be aware of it. Had she done it on purpose they would have detected the effect and the affectation instantly, for people living out of the world can have very acute instinctive perceptions of unreality. Consuelo, however, could not "gush" or dress herself in pretty, smiling insincerities.

Sometimes her elders wondered if she were not too grave for her time of life: then her gravity would take a quaint twist, and they began to perceive that a sort of humorousness may go along with silent, watching eyes, and a mouth not continually broadened into laughter. Consuelo was not, in our modern sense of the word, particularly witty: she was not constantly saying funny things: but she saw them wherever they were, and had a kind of joyous relish of them.

Laban, the gardener, had never struck either of her aunts as queer: nor could they recognize anything original in the carter, Lijah Rowden, or in Pilgrim Gay, the foreman of the farm. They soon perceived, how-

ever, that Consuelo studied them with a puzzling interest and amusement.

Laban took an early opportunity of complaining to her of Miss Amelia's fondness for new flowers. Like all gardeners, he indulged in much latitude of complaint, which he combined with a punctual obedience in practice.

"Miss Mealy," he said, "be foriver werritting about new flowers. That's agin creation. The Lord made all the flowers at onst — I disremember on which day o' the week 'twere; but before Saturday. He got all the creation done by Friday night: so's to be ship-shape by Saturday — just like me. You niver sees me wi' a job half through o' a Saturday mornin'. Some would. There's Matthew Blake — he'd start makin' a new bed o' Saturday. But Goddlemighty, as I were saying, created all the flowers in a batch. There *can't* be new flowers. It's agin the Bible. If there *be* new flowers — who made un? That's what I asks. Miss Mealy says, 'Laban: here's some new flower-seeds. Mind they'll want heat.' That'll tell 'ee where they comed from: if old Arry made un he'd have the heat for'n. But I does what Miss Mealy bids me. 'Tis her rumspensibility. If the Lord says to me o' Judgment Day, 'Laban, how about them flowers wi' unchristian names to 'em as no Bible bred tongue can't learn by heart, and wants so much heat to make 'n start?' I shall say, 'I did as I were bid. Ask Miss Dauntsey. Bible named flowers would ha' done for me. Solomon's Seal, and Moses' Rod, and Jacob's Ladder; Adam's Apple, Eve's Parsley and Esau's Pottage. *I* niver wanted better.' That's what I shall say. But in this vale o' tears we mun do as we're bid by them as pays the week's wage. When I bows my back o'er these new flowers wi' vernal (infernial) names, I minds me o' Naaman. He was a well-to-do man, wi' Savins belike;

a lord, like Lord Chalkminster, but he was given lief to bow hisself in the House o' Rimmon, because he couldn't well help bowing when the king were leanin' on his shoulder (a heavy man, I'm thinking, like the Prince Regent), before Nisrod, his god. And so I can't help bowing o'er these flowers. I tried onst, plantin' 'em wi' a long-handled hoe, but Miss Mealy had 'em all up next mornin', and said I'd done it crooked. So I give it up, and plants 'em like the others. The Lord's a fair man, and knows as poor folk mun do as rich folks' fancies will."

"It's a great thing, anyway," said Consuelo demurely, "to know exactly what he will overlook."

"So it is. And few there be that find it," responded Laban readily. "Some don't. There's Gearge, Squire's derryman. He'll keep sober six nights, and come home o' market night wi' beer enough in his inside to water all they so-called flowers (as can't be flowers if Goddlemighty niver thought o' makin' 'em at the start), and he'll try and iscuse hisself, sayin' as the Lord must know the days o' the week, seein' he made 'em all and gave un their names: and market night is not like Sunday night, and a man mun take what's offered. That's how the undegenerate blind theirsens, and rolls headlong down the broad road that leadeth to destruction."

Consuelo found George, the Dairyman, nearly as good company as Laban.

"Yes, miss," he would tell her, "nat'rally I knows Laban, seein' he married into our branch of the family. Ay, he's sober. He preaches in chapel, and that's all they care about — but he be ignorant. 'Twould surprise you. I heered un myself say as there were rightly fourteen Apostles: countin' Paul and him as they all fell on. Arter that I couldn't rightly see my way to listening to *his* doctrine. Twelve Apostles I'll abide

by: like my family afore me as had twelve Apostle-spoons. Eleven was gi'en away one by one wi' my eleven aunts when they got married: there's one left. If there'd been fourteen Apostles, there'd be three."

"Well, George, you admit yourself Laban Smith's a sober man. That's to his credit, anyway."

"Ay, miss. He's sober: so's the pump. But it's not Bible to swear off the drink altogether. The Lord would ha' changed the wine at Canaan o' Galilee into water else. If it's so mortal wicket to have a pint o' market night, why ain't it in the Ten Commandments?"

"Is a pint much?"

"May be half a dozen glasses, miss," said George, perceiving that the foreign-bred young lady was ignorant of English measures of capacity.

"Do you know the young man they call Hurdcott?" Consuelo asked Laban one day.

"I don't know much good on him. He's like to turn out disrespectable. Squire has his eye on un — for he's in wi' all the poachingest good for noughts i' the three paridges."

"What does 'poachingest' mean?"

"Them as goes arter the hares and that."

"That's what my uncle does."

"Ay, miss. But they're his own hares. Miss Priscilla can kill a couple o' ducks for her dinner, if she have a mind; but if I'd a mind ever so, I mustn't steal her ducks."

Consuelo found it hard to think of Hurdcott and stealing in the same breath, and did not want to try.

"Is Hurdcott his Christian name or his family name?" she asked.

"Family name! He niver had no family, nor yet no family never had he. He were found. Not as Hurdcott's a Christian name: there ain't no Hurdcotts i' the Bible. It's just what folks call him."

Laban liked to talk, and so he went on:

"He don't belong to these three paridges. A shepherd man up Avonsbury way, in t'other valley, *he* found him: so he said. He was another queer sort; some said he were a murderer in disguise. But that must ha' been talk, for he was niver hanged. 'Twas he found Hurdcott: a small wee baby wi' starin' black eyes: he's got 'em still."

"So have I got mine."

Laban glanced slowly at her eyes and said,

"P'r'aps 'tis the fashion, miss, where you was born: and it's not my place to take note o' whativver colour Squire's family has their eyes on. Them as has black eyes in these parts be mostly gypsy-bred. Some said Hurdcott must ha' been some gypsy child. He's wild enough for't. Cormac Rooh, the shepherd as found him, was a quiet lonesome man as hadn't much truck wi' anyone — he bred up the boy all to himself, just as if 't had been a dead yow's lamb: and *they* don't thrive in general, but this one did. He grew up tall and straight enough, and strong enough. But what's the good o' straight legs if you walks crooked wi' em?"

Consuelo was quite aware that Laban had no wish to give her a good impression of Hurdcott: but she was not willing to receive a bad one. She remembered the young man's face, and trusted more to it than to the pharisaical old gardener's innuendoes. All the same, it hurt her, somehow, to find that Hurdcott was ill esteemed. There are people who can like you very well and believe all manner of evil about you. Consuelo could not believe evil of anyone she liked. After all, the worst she had heard yet of Hurdcott was that he had bad friends, and was suspected of poaching. She did not understand much about poaching: and hares seemed to her a sort of wild animals that could not exactly belong to anyone like ducks.

CHAPTER VIII

CONSUELO liked walking, which her aunts did not: and they conveniently concluded that it was a Sicilian peculiarity. They made no objection to her taking long walks all by herself, since she never returned tired, but seemed all the better for it. She would sometimes tell them of the beautiful things she had seen, and they felt flattered, as if they had made the wintry downs themselves, though they had lived among the downs all their lives without noticing their beauties.

“I do think it gives her a bit of colour, this walking,” Amelia would declare. “And it’s a thing there’s no end of. I was afraid she’d find the time long: but she seems as happy as the day. Priscilla, it’s a fine thing to be young.”

Priscilla mildly shook her head: she had never found anything particularly fine in her youth: nevertheless, she fully assented to the excellence of being young in Consuelo’s case. As a matter of fact, both aunts had been younger since the girl’s coming than they had been for years.

The Chalkshire villages are as beautiful as any in England, and Summer Avon was one of the prettiest on the plain. No two cottages were alike, and they sat by the wayside in such varying positions that it was not possible for the most perverse describer to call the road a street. Some stood back with all the garden in front, facing down it: others presented a gable-end to the passer-by, and looked sideways onto the plot of flowers and vegetables. Their cottages and gardens were about all the Chalkshire peasants had in those far-

off days: of wages they got little enough. Votes and smart clothes were undreamed of.

One night at supper, Squire Dauntsey turned to his niece and said,

“Lola, you that are so great at walking, why don’t you go as far as the Plough Inn at Iddlestone to see the hounds meet?”

Squire Dauntsey had given up talking Chalkshire indoors and kept it for the farm. This was partly common-sense, for he supposed Consuelo would not understand it, and partly it was a tribute to her. Perhaps he did not choose that she should compare his manner of speech with her father’s.

“When is the meet?” asked Amelia.

“To-morrow. At ten o’clock.”

Consuelo enquired about the way and the distance, and said that she would go. I think her uncle had meant to offer himself as escort, but when it came to the point he was too shy. It would be “little market” at Chalkminster, and his niece never guessed that he would stop away on her account. She did not yet realize the wide difference between big Market on Tuesday, and the half-hearted secondary market on Saturday. Hitherto the Squire had been glad enough of the excuse to go into “town” whether business really demanded his presence there or no.

Next morning Consuelo was up by half past seven, and soon after eight was on her way; she need not have started for an hour or more. When she left the house all the world was gray-white or gray-black: the trees along the valley stood out in naked blackness against the dove gray of the downs behind, but their beauty seemed to be more wonderful than it could have been had all their exquisite tracery been hidden in summer green.

Each one now had a more appealing individual char-

acter; they were not clashed together into mere bulks and masses of colour. Every twig could hang its lovely dark lace out against the white sky. The fields were white too, for there had been a light frost in the night; but presently the east cast up a faint blush, and soon the unrisen sun changed all their pearl to opal. Along the little river a trail of thin mist hung like a pale arras with the landscape peering through for pattern.

It was scarcely cold, for there was but a breath out of the south: and the touch of the morning air on the girl's face was like a pure caress. As she walked eastward the glow of the white dawn gave to her beauty the only thing it lacked. The sun like a red harvest moon, lay soon on the lips of the dawn, waiting to shake himself free of the mist. To her it seemed divinely still, as if the rested world were listening for the voice of God to bid it turn to its daily task. There was none of the tangled skein of sound that is all the silence of the south comes to. But the stillness was not death-like, only patient — patient and ineffably devout.

The trees beside the river stood as ready for the signal for a great procession.

“I see men as trees walking —” for the first time Consuelo realized the serene splendour of the image. At home she had said her prayers, not carelessly, for carelessness was not her way: but with the half sense of meaning in an habitual form of words. Now she worshipped, not out of obedience, but because she must. Words were no longer on her lips, but that which speech tries to catch in its net of expression had broken the net and made itself free. Not her knees bowed, but all herself. Had she stooped to kiss the frosty grass it would have been only touching the hem of His garment.

She could not fathom the springs of her happiness: nor would she try. She had that grace of sweetness

that never picks God's gifts to bits to see if the material is worth anything. She did not even need to bid herself note that she was happy. It did not come into her mind that being glad was a treason to her dead, to friends whose lives and hers were drawn now different ways. Between them all and her was no black gulf of bitter separation, only the golden bridge of absence across which love flies with surest foot. How could she be lonely in this lovely porch of God's great house where there is no distance! Was she orphaned whose parents were held close in the arms of the Father she saw all about her?

She did not know that it was strange that she could see Him: unusual. The living do not weigh the wonder of being alive, nor the pure of heart realize that it is they only who see God.

Presently she was in doubt of the way, and glad to see a man, of whom she could ask it, coming towards her. Long before they met she knew it was Hurdcott: she recognized him with undisguised pleasure. All these weeks she had not seen him, and he had been her first friend in England.

He was as proud, and as much ashamed, of the frank delight she had in meeting him, as a consciously bad Catholic might be if a Saint appeared to him. He thought too much of her to think of her beauty: perhaps no very manly man attends to the dress in which she is clad whom he devoutly worships. And though her beauty was a part of Consuelo, it was only a part: Hurdcott could not attend to anything less than herself. This continued always: to the end he never thought of this or that feature; of any special grace of form or face, or even character: he had perhaps no faculty for analysis. He could only think of her.

The open warmth of her greeting made him shy, which he had not been when they were before together.

The greeting was simply friendly; but that she should treat him as a friend abashed him. Of course he did not criticize her, or tell himself that in her frank welcome there was anything beneath her dignity. She could not be undignified, to him she could not be anything but perfect.

But he stood before her more than ever conscious of his lowliness: his eyes were not downcast, but his heart was. He thought himself a good-for-nothing.

He had very little to say, nor had she much: they were neither of them glib talkers. Still she showed how glad she was to see him: and it made him ashamed that she should be so glad. Nevertheless, it made him proud also. During the weeks since they had met he had been thinking of her, perhaps always, and not idly: for he had really changed; given up old haunts and habits, and bad company.

"I have often wondered where you were," she told him; "it seemed odd that I never met you as I walk so much."

He did not tell her that he had often seen her; that over and over again he had almost run away from her, plunging into some wayside brake till she had gone by — because he would have given so much to be near her and hear her voice. How he had almost waylaid her, and then hidden from her.

As she looked at him she wondered if he and she were at all alike: she was, she knew, quite Sicilian in type; his hair and eyes and skin had the same southern tone. His build, too, though strong, had the same Sicilian lightness.

She could not help remembering that he had been called gypsy-bred, but she had seen many gypsies, and his darkness was quite unlike theirs. His skin was olive-dark, not chestnut-dark: and he had none of the gypsy expression. His great black eyes were deep,

with no quick, shifty glances of sharpness and cunning: he did not look "knowing."

"I am going," she said, "to see the hounds meet at the Plough Inn. Am I on the right road?"

"You cannot miss the road, only keep straight on."

He did not offer to be her escort this time: there being no need of his guidance, it would have seemed to him a liberty.

But she did not immediately leave him and go on.

"I have asked several people about you," she told him, "but I never heard much."

"Not much good? There wasn't much to hear."

"People are not clever at describing other people's good points. When one is a little stupid it is easier to recollect the faults. I have not heard of many of yours."

She smiled as she said this, as if the faults reported had not heavily affected her.

"I could tell you better than they could," he said. "I'm of no account: a good-for-nought, as they call it."

"That," she told him, "is what they said."

He looked at her, but saw she regarded him with the same frank and kindly friendliness.

"I don't exactly know what I'm good for," she observed.

This he disliked: any comparison of herself with him he shrank from. He looked hurt.

"They don't seem," he said, "to have told any lies about me. I have kept bad company, and I've earned a bad name — or got one, anyway."

"I do not believe," she answered calmly, "that you keep bad company."

She had noticed instantly the tense which he had used.

"I hardly keep any company at all."

She thought that in fact he had a peculiar air of loneliness.

"Nor," she said, in the same voice, that had a charming ring of determination, "do I believe that you deserve a bad name."

He did not protest that henceforth at least he would deserve a better.

"I have no name at all," he said.

She could not immediately answer. It touched her to see the young man clearly ashamed of what he could not help, and what to her seemed to be of so little moment.

"I came, like the wind, no one knows from where," he added.

"I do not see that the names of things matter," she said. "*We* make the names, and they are often silly: God makes the things — and they are none the worse for our foolish names of them. 'God' is only our name of *Him*: if nobody had ever existed it would make no difference, though He would never have had a name."

She paused a moment and went on.

"Does *my* name matter to *you*? You do not, I expect, even know it."

He, in fact, only knew that she was Miss Dauntsey, Squire Dauntsey's niece: and it was true that if that had been all it would not have mattered to him in the least.

"My name is Consuelo. Now you do know, it makes no difference."

"No," he said, "it makes no difference what they call you."

"Nor does it make any difference to me what they call you."

"Not if they called me bad?"

"That is only another name. If you are not bad it would not matter either."

"I am not bad," he said quietly.

His saying this greatly pleased her. There are men who think it almost fine to be, or have been, bad: who will find a sort of satisfaction that it is not specially humble in announcing their badness to those whom they believe to be most innocent. Hurdcott was not like that.

That he was altogether beneath and unworthy of her he knew, and he could not bear to be wrongly accused: but he would not call himself what he did not think himself.

He saw that what he had said made her pleased. He could not see how manly and honest he had looked when he had said it.

He added nothing to it: and nothing he could have added would have been at all worthy of the simplicity of that one brief phrase. If he could have told her that henceforth he meant to be something better than "not bad"; that for her sake, and because of what her mere crossing the narrow path of his life had done for him, he intended to be wholly different, he would have been impertinent: and he would, to himself, have seemed like one who tries to stand in the flattering light of intended achievements. But he could do no such thing and be himself.

CHAPTER IX

WHEN they parted they continued thinking of each other: in truth, he was always thinking of her. Hitherto he had had little to think of, and it was inevitable that once she had come into his thoughts she should dominate them. He was fully conscious of that much, and not ashamed of it. To her, towards her and the inward image he held of her, that is, he was most humble: but he was not servile: and the sense of her distance from him could not make him so. He did not argue with himself that he had a right to be always thinking of her: his nature was not argumentative. Had he been given to such discussion of right he might have remembered that the meanest man is invited to think of God, and can therefore be guilty of no presumption in setting even the highest of God's creatures in his thoughts. In the quality itself of his thoughts there was nothing to tell him he was taking a liberty.

She thought of him also, and had very often done so since their first meeting. But, naturally, she had not been absorbed in thinking of him. He had few memories — only one that could have rivalled her: she had many. He had no interests, or had had none till she suddenly made his life interesting to himself. She had many. He had, till now, had no purpose, and she had much.

Nevertheless, he fell into that purpose of hers, and became part of it. He was not essential to her, as she was to him: but he was important. There are many people to whom almost everything and everybody is trivial, or of trivial consequence, for they are trivial

themselves, and their life remains always of a poor texture and incoherent pattern. There are a few to whom nothing is meaningless, to whom life itself is so noble that everyone brought into their sphere of it is ennobled.

Consuelo had not the placid conceit of those who deem it their function to elevate all their friends to their own high level: for those good creatures start with the serene conviction of their own superiority. It was Consuelo's happy grace to think of herself not meanly but little. She was young, and the world outside interested her so freshly that she was not driven inward to consideration of herself for occupation.

She was intelligent, and not ill-educated: in books she had found all manner of pleasure and instruction: but she was minded to look for further knowledge in the sources whence books have been drawn. Why should she not learn, as the book-makers must have done, from the three supreme fountains of inspiration — God, Man and Nature? Perhaps she never said this to herself: one class of thoughtful person is perpetually engaged in conversation with that one never-disappointing interlocutor — himself. Consuelo was more given to let her instructors talk to her. The former sort of observer is never anything else but a teacher — even if no visible pupils be available: that sort is your predestined writer at last. Consuelo would always be a learner, and would certainly never write anything.

Hurdcott was already one of her teachers, which, if he could have suspected it, would have shocked him not a little.

No one had ever bored Consuelo, a miraculous circumstance, due less to any general forbearance on the part of her contemporaries than to her own felicity of nature: it has been said on an earlier page that Elia

was not disposed to allow a bore any jurisdiction over him, but preferred to use him for amusement. But this in Elia was accomplishment, and the essayist was scarcely so unsophisticated as to be unaware of it: in Consuelo's case it was different. She did not know that she was immune from being bored: she only knew that everyone interested her. Some certainly were less interesting than others; Hurdcott was the most interesting person she had met.

Of course the mystery of his origin helped to create about him a peculiar atmosphere, but the atmosphere was no more to her than her own beauty was to him: he was himself more interesting than any circumstance connected with him. She divined in him character of an unusual and high quality, and it was not surface-written: she was sure that what she could see was only a hint of what was hidden from sight: but even that which showed itself assured her that he was not common. He seemed almost unwilling to be respected, and yet she already respected him. That his surroundings were merely a peasant's was obvious, that his faults had been those of a peasant was plain enough. She, however, paid scant attention to what might have been his faults — they were not her business. There was something in him not so easily accounted for. Some influence had helped to form him, concerning which she could only feel confident that it was powerful and strange: his faults had been in spite of it, perhaps a result of the removal of it.

By the time Consuelo reached the Plough Inn the road about it was filling with company, and she began to feel shy enough to wish she had not come. But, as it happened, she fell in with acquaintance who at once recognized her.

Mrs. Grately of the Hut was sister of Mr. Jopp, the landlord of the Plough, and had business with him.

She ordered out the chariot, which once belonged to a lord, and had still a faded coronet on the panel, and persuaded Miss Lamb that a meet of hounds was a pretty thing to see, and the fine day a good reason for an outing. Mary was not willing to be persuaded, for Hazlitt was shrouded in literature of a morning, and retired to Olympus not without indications of thunderbolts in his grasp. Elia professed to dislike mornings, and asserted that humanity only became human when the lamps were lighted.

Mary was inclined to relax the rigours of high literary society by a gossiping drive with her hostess, and, without much note of the wintry beauties of the way, found the airing did her good.

"There!" cried Mrs. Grately, as they drew near the Plough. "If there isn't Miss Dauntsey, Squire Dauntsey's niece, as came by the mail the night the lioness set us all in such a caddle. I wonder Squire Dauntsey leaves her ramble about alone like that."

"Is it far from here to where they live?"

"Three mile or better."

"It must be more than that to Sicily," said Mary, remembering how Miss Dauntsey had arrived alone. "I should like to bid her good-morning."

"And p'raps you'd ask her in to sit with you while I does my matter with my brother. 'Twould be fitter for the young lady. Folks might wonder at her: and being foreign-bred she wouldn't know our ways. Young ladies o' quality don't trapuss afoot to see hounds meet."

"Well, Mrs. Grately," said Mary, with cheerful good-nature, "you remember she would not be afraid of lions that night, and you yourself encouraged her to walk off over the downs to her uncle's house with some young villager by moonlight. I daresay she thinks the hounds as safe as the lions, and perhaps her

own company by daylight as proper as your young countryman's by night."

They overtook Consuelo, and Mary leaned out of the carriage window.

"Good day, Miss Dauntsey. May I remind you we have met before? Mrs. Grately here persuaded me that a Londoner should take the chance of seeing hounds meet, and so I'm out pleasuring. Won't you step in and let me pretend I only came to do dragon to a young lady? Then no one will call me frivolous. I'm Mary Lamb—which may remind you of the lion. Come and sit down by me? Till the Millennium I'm safer to sit down with than a lion."

Consuelo laughed, and accepted the kind old maid's offer very willingly. Mrs. Grately bobbed out and the girl took her place. Miss Lamb found her young friend as good a sight by day as by night, and almost said as much.

"You mustn't expect me to tell you much, for I don't know anything about hounds and meets." She warned the girl. "And you can see for yourself that yonder ladies in the grand carriage are monstrous fine and think me a quiz. But they can't make *you* out at all—they're wondering where I got hold of you—for you're of their own breed, and they are supposed to know everybody that is."

Consuelo could not perceive anything remarkable in the ladies: they were just fine people, nothing more. In the Favorita on a Thursday afternoon she had seen a hundred such carriages filled with ladies of the same type. A gentleman on a nearly thoroughbred horse rode up to the side of the carriage and began to talk to them. They asked him who Consuelo was, but he could not tell them: and, of course, they did not let her see that they were enquiring about her.

"Perhaps," the gentleman suggested, "she has

driven out from Chalkminster in an Inn carriage, and the elderly lady is her duenna: her ex-governess, very likely."

"She has not the look of one of the young ladies of the Minster Precincts," declared one of those in the carriage. "They all have the air of Canons in bonnets, and her clothes were never made in Chalkminster."

"I wish they all had red coats," complained Miss Lamb, "it's not fair on the public who come to look, to hunt in a black coat. Here's a fine fellow: let's admire him. 'Tis what he comes for. If I had a crown in my pocket I'd bet it that the old man yonder in the mulberry-coloured nose is the Master: see how our pretty gentleman shirks away from him. Where do you suppose the fox is?"

"Over there, I should think," said Consuelo, laughing, with a little nod across the valley towards a clump of wood with a tangle of undergrowth.

"I was right about the Master," said Mary. "Look what a snarly smile he has, and how they all pull off their queer little caps to him. I understand that Masters of Hounds are more frightening than Blue Beard."

But she was wrong: the hot-eyed old gentleman was only Lord Idmiston from the neighbouring Manor House. The Master did not arrive from Tedworth for full five minutes. The hounds came just before him.

There were plenty of smart carriages, and none of the people in them attracted Consuelo particularly. There were pretty girls, and imposing liveries, and much more imposing elderly ladies to whom the pretty young ladies belonged, and plenty of well-valeted young men, on excellent horses. The scene was lively and cheerful, but none of the groups composing it were outwardly striking enough to arrest Consuelo's curiosity or attention. There was an agreeable air of prosperity, everyone was well-dressed, and nearly

everybody seemed disposed for pleasure. Good health and good humour appeared to belong to these people as a birthright. It was all very pleasant; nevertheless, the lonely figure of Hurdcott dwelt in Consuelo's mind as of more significance: it stood out with an individual unlikeness to any other she had seen, whereas these well-fed, well-bred, affluent people of quality were not different from those of their class she had been mixed with all her life. They talked English instead of Italian. They were Lords and Ladies and Sir Johns instead of being called Prince and Princess, Duke or Don; but, after all, the type was mainly the same. That, at all events, was the superficial, exterior view: had she known them, she might have found more divergence, but to-day she was able only to look on from outside.

The setting of the picture was more interesting, because it was more new to her. The steep ridge of down behind the small roadside inn; itself characteristic with a sort of resolute, square ugliness that was picturesque in spite of itself: the highway filled with horsemen and carriages: the level water-meadows, and beyond them the humps of rounded down rising into lonely uplands — all this was at least unlike Sicily, particularly unlike Palermo. So were the knots of country folk who had straggled hither to see the gentry begin their sport: the men, even the young men were mostly ugly: their faces had much the same gray emptiness as the downs; they hardly spoke even among themselves. She did not hear one of them laugh: they made no gestures. They watched without appearing to see. Certainly they were poor, but not poorer probably than Sicilian peasants. Their poverty, however, seemed all they had.

“I should like to know,” said Mary Lamb, “what you are thinking of?”

"I was thinking of Merry England. 'Tis a phrase I have often heard."

A gentleman on a horse near them had said something to some ladies in a carriage and they were all laughing. For a moment Miss Lamb wondered if the girl were feeling homesick: jealous she already felt sure Consuelo could not be. But she knew well enough that Miss Dauntsey must be unused to look at society from outside, and it seemed possible that she found her position odd and lonely.

Consuelo's eyes, however, gave her a clue: they were resting still on a shabby group of peasants, squalid fellows with dull eyes, leaning over a gate and looking as if toil itself must be cheerfuller than their idleness.

Miss Lamb liked to be cheerful herself, and was averse from morbid ideas of responsibility. For her own good breakfast she thanked Providence — implicitly by feeling the better of it, if not in any special exuberance of phrase. It was well to be warmly clad, and to have even an inn chariot to save her legs, for she hated walking.

"I suppose the Almighty meant it so," she said.

Divine meanings were not so clearly known to Consuelo as to assure her that He meant anyone to look exactly like those peasants. If she could she would have given them another expression without fear of trying to balk Heaven's decrees.

CHAPTER X

IN the afternoon Consuelo was out again, but the day was different. The frost was gone, and the sun, too. A very thin mist had come, that seemed rather an emanation of the gray downs than anything the low sky had let fall: as if the desolate earth asserted itself, and would be as cloudy as the stooping heavens.

When one has been out of doors in early morning on such a day as this, when the pearl and silver and opal of the dawn have yielded to a grayness like wool, a kind of wistful regretfulness is apt to come against the spirits: the morning seems far away, as if it belonged to a former part of life: its trivial events and features hang in the memory like a picture.

Consuelo's nature was not melancholy though it was grave, in spite of her keenness to note what was quaint and queer wherever she caught sight of it. She was not melancholy now, but she was in truth suffering from a most undesired twinge of homesickness.

The picture of the meet hung in her mind, and showed itself, in the gray afternoon, in brighter colours than had seemed at the time to belong to it. She was not now any more than then envying the rich folk their fine carriages and mettled horses: but she thought of the young people, and could not help remembering that she too was young and very capable of pleasure. A few short months ago she had been just like them, taking her own full share in the little pleasant things of life and youth.

She heard the echo of the laughter, and found herself wondering what had made them merry. It was

cheery, healthy laughing, and she was sure the jest had been kindly.

Here she had no youthful companions: she did not know of one girl of her age among her uncle's few and scattered neighbours, who were mostly elderly people.

She had walked out from the back of the house, through Amelia's pretty garden, letting herself out by a little door in the high thatched wall into a long paddock that had once been an archery ground. In some far away days young Dauntseys had been merry there with their friends. They were fast asleep now in the hillocky churchyard by the tiny old church, that sat on a low knoll beyond the village in a high-shouldered fashion that made one think of a hen with chickens brooded under her wings. From one end of the close a path led, beside a very old hedge of thorn, up the downs to a place called Dogbury Rings. It was along this that Consuelo was walking. Here and there a tree rose out of the hedge, and generally under the tree there could still be seen the dilapidated remains of a rustic seat: on those seats forgotten Miss Dauntsey had sat with admiring swains.

Consuelo did not want any swains: but she would have liked someone young to walk beside her.

The path swept down a long stubble-slope, and then steeply mounted towards the terraced hilltop. It was a new fashion to call the place Chlorus's Camp, and to say that the father of Constantine had made it. Whether the Roman general was ever there or no the camp had existed long before Rome was founded.

When at last Consuelo had reached the top of the hill, she sat down on the outer terrace of the camp, where the soft mossy turf was dry and short. At her feet the down dropped steeply to the valley, broad here, for the opposite downs were far away and much lower than the place where she was sitting. She was sur-

prised to notice how wide the landscape was in spite of the mist. Nothing seemed hidden, though everything was flattened in a dun monotone. The highest point of the plain, Chalk Beacon, did not seem far off, though she knew that miles of valley and down lay between it and her. From the cottages among the bare trees by the little river shafts of thin blue smoke stood up straight in the motionless air.

Her uncle's house did not look russet red, as it was, but had the same ashen colour as everything else, except the black trees.

A hare came limping past, without fearing her. Close beneath, at the foot of the terrace, was a clump of wild junipers. Suddenly, after she had been sitting still a long time, there came from it a horrid shrill squeal, of some small helpless creature in agony and terror. The sound was intolerably cruel, and she could not bear it, but slipped quickly down, and beat all the patch of bush with a stick that lay near. The squeals ceased, and a graceful, spiteful-looking weasel leapt out and dashed into another clump of juniper. She parted the other bushes with her hand, and found a tiny rabbit, not larger than a kitten, already dead. She had done no good.

With an unreasonable sense of depression and futility she climbed back to her former place, but did not again sit down. The soundless peace of the scene had taken an air of ruthlessness, a callous indifference. She all at once became aware of her own selfishness and discontent. What had she to suffer or endure? Again the morning arose in her mind, less a memory than a picture, and she saw the knots of dull-faced peasants. None of them had looked envious. Not one of those gray, unexpectant faces had shown any sense of jealousy of the rich and prosperous whose costly pleasure they were come to stare at.

She knew that she herself must seem rich to them. In fact, she was by no means poor: her uncle had been surprised to find how well-off she was. Even now she had a purse with guineas in it in her pocket, and she had nothing to spend money on. She, too, was finely clad and well fed, lay warm and softly, and had loving kinsfolk by whose hearth she sat welcome.

Instead of sitting down she paced slowly round the level top of the terrace till it brought her near the London Road, and here the view was different. The coach-way ran, hedgeless, between rolling stretches of upland, dotted thickly with black clumps of wild juniper, that looked like crouching spies. On this side not a farm or cottage was to be seen: only sullen sky and sullen down. The road that led at last to London seemed the dreariest in the world. Not a living being could be seen on it, though long reaches of it, as it climbed hill after hill, were in her view: not a cart, nothing. The camp consisted of two rings of which the inner enclosed a flat space of perhaps two acres or more. Between it and the outer ring, which was the higher of the two, was a distance of at least a hundred yards, so that the whole area was considerable. The two flat spaces had been ploughed, and were now covered with stubble. It had lost its golden tint, and had much the same grayish colour as the turfed terraces.

On the side towards the London Road, the outer ring was broken by what had been, Consuelo supposed, the gate of the camp.

As she walked towards this gap, she was wondering about the people who had made this place. She knew scarcely anything about archeology, but had heard her uncle say that they were the Druids, who had also built the great monolithic temple called Hengistone on the plain beyond Avonbury: at least, they

were the race of which the Druids were the priests. Squire Dauntsey had no idea how long ago it was though that these hill-men had lived, but supposed it was more than a thousand years before the birth of Christ: so at least thirty centuries must have gone by since these rings had been raised.

She wondered if the scene about had changed much in all that time: it had a primeval look as if it might be now nearly what it was then. If the makers of the camp had been naked savages she could not suppose that it had been raised for the temporary exigence of some brief war: it must, she thought, have been the permanent, fortified home perhaps of a whole tribe: men and women must have lived here, children been born here: perhaps the outer space was for the cattle and for the tents or wattle huts of the fighting men. The families, the women and children might have occupied the inner and doubly defended area, and the chieftain have had there his quarters.

The plain is thickly strewn here and there with grassy mounds wherein chieftains are supposed to have been buried, with war-horse, wife and slave. Some of them, she thought, might hold, or have held once, the bones of forgotten great men who had been powerful here.

Towards Chalkminster the hillside was scored with odd curving trenches between shallow and thin terraces, the use of which Consuelo could not guess.

All the while, though her thoughts wandered idly thus into the very dim, conjectural past, they were half busy with the present and herself. She was ashamed of the brief cloud of wistfulness, that had scarcely amounted to discontent. She ought to be content, and it was only to-day that she had doubted of being so.

Was she selfish? Was it not selfishness that had brought her out this afternoon? Her aunts were sitting down yonder in the panelled parlour of the old Manor House that was now her home. No doubt they would have liked her to stay with them and chat away the time. But the room had seemed close, and she had had the unsettled feeling one often suffers from after being out of doors all morning, pleasuring. She could not stay indoors: and had come away into the open air, partly, she confessed, to be alone. In some of our moods we are less lonely by ourselves.

She would be better in future, and repay the kindness of her kinsfolk by being more with them. But she wished she could be useful, too, of use to some of those poorer, less happy than herself. She thought of the small animal she had been too late to save, with an unavailing wish that she had been in time.

CHAPTER XI

WHEN she reached the place where the outer ring of the camp broke, and there was a gap, Consuelo found sitting in it a girl of about her own age: on the mossy turf Consuelo's light tread had made no sound, and she stood over the girl without having betrayed her presence.

It is always mean to watch someone who is not aware of being seen, and Consuelo at once made some slight sound, and the girl looked up.

"I hope I did not startle you," she then said, going down to where the girl was sitting.

"No, Miss Dauntsey. But you walk so light I didn't hear you."

"You know my name; do you come from Summer Avon?"

"Yes, Miss. I'm Jocha Nadder: father works for Squire."

The Christian name seemed odd to Consuelo, who did not recognize it as an abbreviation of Jochabed, and perhaps might not have remembered the name of the mother of Moses.

The girl was pretty in a fashion, with bright, pink cheeks, a good deal of nearly yellow hair, red, full lips, and a nose with some pretension to shape. The mouth was wide, and the teeth large though white enough and regular.

Consuelo, however, did not admire her. The light blue eyes were hard and daring, and the sharp chin did not agree with a heavy, almost square jaw.

"I come up by the cart-way to the rings," said

Jocha. "'Tis private: but Squire ain't particular, and 'tis the nearest to get on the London Road."

"It does not look as if the road led anywhere before London," said Consuelo, smiling. "Are there any villages on it near?"

"No, miss. There's no house till the hut. Then no place for miles."

Jocha held a small bundle in her lap.

"You are surely not going to walk to London?"

"I shan't walk. There's a coach goes by here soon: not the mail . . . 'tis cheaper."

Consuelo was surprised to find the girl was really going so far.

"It seems," she said, "lonely starting on so long a journey all alone. Has no one come to see you off?"

"I didn't tell 'em I was going. 'Tis my own notion."

Jochabed smiled, not shyly; and Consuelo liked the smile very little. In fact, she did not care for the girl at all.

But she sat down by her, and said gently,

"Isn't it unkind to go like that? Perhaps you and they have had a quarrel: but they'll be hurt."

"Not much hurt. Stepmother'll not cry her eye out: she have lost one, and keeps it all for the main chanst. There, Miss Dauntsey! I daresay you'll be asking about me when you gets home, so you'll know soon or late: and I'll tell ee: I'm in trouble."

The announcement was not made like a confession: there was no confusion or shame about Jocha as she spoke, only a defiance that was half insolent.

Consuelo had been from the first repelled rather than attracted: the sense of repulsion grew stronger, but is one only to be useful when one is interested? Here might be her chance of being in time.

Jocha had no delicate fibres of sensitiveness, but she had instincts like a cat, and she knew that the girl by her side would have shrunk from her if she had yielded to mere impulse. Jocha seemed to be scanning the London Road, but out of the corners of her light-blue eyes she noted well Consuelo's determination not to give way to any such movement of repulsion. Instead of edging further from her Consuelo drew nearer, and Jocha observed it: nevertheless, she did not like her.

"It is bad to be alone in a trouble," Consuelo said gently. "Can I help you in yours?"

Jocha's eyes opened wider, as she stared out at the white road. Was the other girl really so innocent, "putting it on"? Perhaps she was forcing her to be more outspoken.

"It's the usual trouble," Jocha said hardily. "A man in it," and she turned her face on Consuelo's with a stare that was half a grin.

She was sure she was understood now: though no flush had deepened her own colour, Consuelo blushed, and Jocha hated her for it.

For a moment there was silence, and then Jocha felt her hand touched: she was again looking towards the road, and kept her eyes that way obstinately.

She did not pull her hand away, but she did not respond in the least to the gentle pressure on it. Consuelo was moved, and she felt it, but with a tough resentment. She would not be pitied.

"And you are going to London?"

Jocha nodded.

"What for? To get away?"

"Yes, to get away. I'm sick of stepmother's sermons and father's black looks. I'll get my own living up there — and a better living than theirs, p'r'aps."

Was this Consuelo's chance of usefulness? There seemed so little that she could do.

She remembered the horrible cry of helpless tiny suffering, and how the poor small living creature had been killed before her help had come. If she had been in time then, she would probably have never come on to find this girl, as she had done. It must be more than chance.

She dare not throw away this new opportunity that had come. God is not to let us choose our way of service.

"Have you any money to start with up in London?" she asked simply. "You may not all at once find any means of earning any. I can help you in that, at least."

Jocha had no objection to money wherever it might come from. She was not grateful, but she was practical.

"I'm sure you're very good, miss," she said with less apathy. "'Tis bad arriving in a strange town with a light pocket. I mightn't find a place to my mind right once, and lodgin' comes dear in large places."

Consuelo's hand was withdrawn from hers, and that Jocha felt to be a relief: she knew it was only taken away to seek for a purse, but she did not intend it to be replaced, and shifted her position to prevent it.

Consuelo gave her all the money she had, and Jocha's light eyes gleamed with satisfaction to see how much it was. She had not expected more than a few shillings, but even for them she had relaxed: ten guineas made her almost respectful. She had hardly given Squire Dauntsey's niece credit for being rich. The respect, however, was wholly external: Consuelo must be a silly creature. And Jocha at once searched her shallow mean brain for a motive. "Folks don't

cast away guineas for nought," she assured herself.

"I'm sure you're very good, miss," she said again, putting away the gold with not a trace of the shyness with which it had been given. "There comes the coach. I can ride all the way now."

The coach was indeed in sight, but still far away, labouring up the long hill. It was no high-flyer or rocket. Jocha looked at it, and wished it would come quicker. The idea of London was agreeable to her: she had always hated home and the endless dullness of Summer Avon.

She loved the sense of being, as she felt, rich. And she blessed the luck that had sent Consuelo to her side. But she did not like her, and was sure that the Squire's niece did not like her.

"I'll tell ee, miss," she said, fingering the string of her bundle, "the name of the man."

Consuelo's pale cheeks flushed, and she felt for the first time angry: too angry for quick speech. If Jocha had looked up and seen the indignant light in the Sicilian girl's grave black eyes she might have held her tongue. But Jocha had always avoided Consuelo's eyes: and, after all, her spite might but have gathered confirmation of the mean suspicion she had taken.

"'Tis well," Jocha went on, "for quality to know folks as they be: they're easy deceived else. The fellow as pays for the child—he gives *me* nothing—is the lad they call Hurdcott."

Still Jocha looked away, intending to move off to the road herself in a moment. She did not see what she had done.

But Consuelo's eyes were fixed upon her face: and it was not strange that she had to turn her own and meet them. Consuelo's nature was strong and deep, Jocha's weak and shallow; there was something compel-

ling in the gaze of those great grave black eyes that forced the shifty blue ones to encounter them reluctantly.

It was scarcely for more than a moment that Jocha could meet them when she did look up. She had never in her life seen any expression at all like that they had. She had been stared at disdainfully, had been used to hold-cheap glances, had heard loud and angry re-creminations; and she had brazened all out easily enough. She tried to brazen this out, too, but found the task unexpectedly hard. When she had first plainly made Consuelo understand the nature of her "trouble," she had known at once that in spite of every impulse to the contrary the foreign girl had not shrunk from her, had been swift to offer the only help she could give. She herself had accepted the help with satisfied alacrity, and had thought more of the giver, not for giving so generously, but for being rich. One must be generous to receive favours generously, and Jocha was mean and paltry to the core. She liked Consuelo's useful money, but she hated her, not exactly for giving it, but for what had made her eager to give it. She knew that the other girl dreaded a danger for her, and Jocha had no dread of it herself, but was hardily set on running into it, and leaving her life to chance. She had a grudge against Consuelo for having, as she thought, tried to make her look before her and be wary. There are people who esteem everyone an enemy who comes between them and their own way. And she was jealous. The man whom she had named she did not love, nor had she ever loved him. How could she love anyone? He had certainly not loved her, though for a disastrous few weeks he had been attracted by what had seemed to him, then, her beauty: and she had made violent show of love for him. His fine figure and face, so different from those of the other village lads, had

had all the effect on her of which she was capable. Heart she had none, but her shallow eyes had been filled.

When, that morning, Hurdcott and Consuelo had met in the road, Jocha had seen them: she was sure now that Hurdcott was in love with the Squire's niece, and that Consuelo was in love with him.

The look which Jocha found it impossible to meet was one of absolute horror and loathing. It was fixed, and beyond the control of volition. Consuelo stood quite still in the attitude she had been in when Jocha began to speak: she did not shrink away physically, but entire and intense repulsion was shown without the slightest movement.

Now I am about to throw away a chance: for which the lazy, indolent reviewer will scold me. What a tragic misunderstanding might be here! Here is the novelist's opportunity for trouble and anguish: as if there were not trouble enough, and agony enough without his ingenuity. But my humble task is to revive, if I can, out of the faded past, Consuelo's true likeness, not to play tricks with it to better a tale.

That Jocha had moved her that miserable creature could see. When Hurdcott's name had been spit out of those unclean lips Consuelo had felt as much, as far as degree went, as all her malice could wish. It was merely loathsome to hear the young man mentioned by the hateful girl at all.

But the actual blow intended had not, whatever Jocha might think, hit home. She had indeed dealt one, and an unpardonable one: for it is a wound almost incurable when the young and pure, like charity believing all things and hoping all things, are forced for the first time to disbelieve and to despair, to see unmistakable wickedness, evil will and heart, not merely faulty conduct. When Jocha had first spoken,

and spoken so carelessly, of her trouble, Consuelo had been revolted; nevertheless, she had tried to believe that the seeming bravado might be some coarse symptom of real shame. Even that she could not in fact believe, for the announcement had been unasked and unneeded.

But when the girl had said, "I'll tell ee the man's name," all the charity she could muster was not enough to blind Consuelo to Jocha's utter baseness. She had stood speechless in undisguised anger and scorn. She had not in the least expected to hear any name she would recognize, but that the girl should mention any name at all was an outrage. Then Hurdcott's had been flung at her.

Before Jocha had time to drop her malignant, shallow eyes Consuelo spoke.

"It is a lie," she said with a cold scorn and anger that she made no effort to mitigate.

Then she immediately turned away as if ashamed of even standing near so vile a neighbour.

"A lie! Ask your aunts, Miss Dauntsey. You'll find whether I be a liar or no."

Consuelo heard her well enough, Jocha's voice was not subdued: but she went on her way without the least sign of hearing. Till it was time for her to make some haste away towards the road to meet the coach Jocha stood watching the other girl's figure as she moved along the top of the ring. The only thing she could admire in Consuelo was what she called her pride. She would like to be able to be proud like that. She would like to know how to turn away with that haughty simple gesture of scorn. But she was proud, herself, of having, after all, been capable of wounding. She knew that she had lied, though the mere statement she had made was true: it did not occur to her that Consuelo would ask no one: she supposed she would by

direct or indirect questionings try and "find out," and Jocha enjoyed already the triumph of being sure that the Squire's proud niece would be told that Hurdcott *was* paying, as she had said, for the child.

How could such a creature as Jocha know that Consuelo would esteem herself as base as she, were she to ask any such questions?

"I am not bad," Hurdcott had told Consuelo that morning.

She did not ask herself what a peasant, reared as he had been, would count as badness. He had been speaking to her: his words had been given for the scales of her judgment. She took them at the value they were meant to have: and she had no doubt of them.

CHAPTER XII

WHEN Consuelo reached the place where she had at first sat down, it seemed as if a very long time must have passed since she was there before. It was not really anything like an hour. But the wintry afternoon was closing in, and the valley was filled with a white fog over which she stood: everything down below was hidden in it, and to plunge down into it was like flinging one's self into a deep pit of whose contents there could be no knowledge. Bare trees, houses, all were invisible: she stood here in the lip of a basin filled to the brim with opaque whiteness like milk!

She knew the way well enough, and had no fear of losing it. There was nothing to fear. But it was odd to leave even this chill light, where every bush was plainly visible, and hide herself in those thick folds of mist so level at the top as to give an inevitable idea of solidity.

Though the path was now downhill she walked less quickly, to be sure of her road. To keep close to the naked hedge of old thorn bushes was quite easy, and her thoughts were, alas, the more free.

Of Jocha, if she could help it, she would not think. But could she help it? There was only one alternative — to think of Hurdcott.

There are some of us so timid of spirit that we abandon, almost at the first assault, anyone who is gravely attacked. We are nervous of misconstruction, afraid of being identified with anything of poor or tainted repute. We have ourselves to think of. We

dare not imperil our good name, or run the risk of being held to have a low standard of conduct. It may cost us something to give up our friend, but our acquaintance are more to us than any friend; our own repute more than anything. So we pay the cost, though it mean all our reality.

Consuelo was not of that class. The breath of accusation was to her an appeal to any loyalty that might be in her. What was the use of friendship if it were for fair weather wear only?

Jocha had meant to make her ashamed of being known to take an interest in Hurdcott, and to frighten her out of any further interest in him. She had only made Consuelo ashamed of having met such a person as Jocha at all, of having, however unwillingly, heard her maligning words.

Instead of resolving to think of Hurdcott no more, to cut him out of her mind, she thought of him much more. His idea had gathered a new and more appealing force: for it appealed now to the generosity of her judgment. No one had ever spoken well of him to her, but the faults hinted at had seemed of so little import that, even had they been his, they scarcely mattered. She had taken his part, in her own mind, without much reference to them one way or the other. She took his part now because he needed her loyalty.

"I am not bad," he had quietly told her: and she had believed him, and she now believed him with a faith more earnest because it was indignant.

His figure, as it had stood before her that morning, was clearer than ever to her memory: his face had more meaning. She recalled its expression, and understood it better. The large eyes, black as her own, with their habitual silent melancholy, seemed still to be looking down into hers. She knew well that he was proud that she should count him a friend, and that he was ashamed

of being, as he held, unfit for her friendship. Not for a moment did she feel the stab of any suspicion that he was really unfit. He had been idle, empty of purpose, content or half-content to be of no use, "a good-for naught." She knew that that was all — and that he was ashamed of being nameless: that what troubled him was what she was, in his eyes, and what he was not. She knew that he could not have talked to her at all, could certainly not have met her friendly eyes with that clear look, had he been bad.

The only present fault she found in him was of thinking too much of the difference of rank that lay between them: those who have the rank can so easily make little of it, if they choose, and put aside the memory of it, as if it were a mere jewel that need not be worn.

Consuelo, when she thought of it at all, regarded it as an obligation: one should not act unworthily of it: but still less should one be unworthy of one's self. If it could have been discovered that Hurdcott was the son of a prince, she would have thought no more of him, and would not have admitted that he had gained the right to think more of himself.

Being southern, she was practical enough to see the full advantage of wealth and high rank, but, being herself, she recognized that the advantage was an external matter: and the outsides of things had for her only a skin-deep significance. She was not afraid of the names of things. A man might be called a gentleman by every noble list in Europe, but unless he were a gentleman she would not think him one.

Through the white mist, that shut her entirely in from all outward sights, Consuelo took her way homeward, scanning one visage, and making to it all the vicarious reparation loyalty can offer. Jocha had made up her shallow mind that the Squire's niece and

Hurdcott were in love with each other. Hurdcott would as soon have thought of being in love with the sun or moon: Consuelo never thought of being in love at all.

When she got in she half expected an affectionate scolding for having staid out so late in the fog. But Priscilla was busy about the house, and Amelia was out, herself. By the time the three ladies met the house was comfortably closed up for the night.

"I've been sitting with Uncle Stratford," said Amelia. "He's impatient for you to come and see him again. I almost expected to find you there. I didn't think you'd be wanting a long walk after walking to the meet and back this morning."

"I didn't go for a long walk: only up to Dogbury Rings. I'll go and see Uncle Stratford to-morrow."

Mr. Rupert Stratford was really Consuelo's great grand-uncle, a brother of the late Mrs. Dauntsey's father. He lived in the village in a good house of his own, which he got with his wife who was dead more than forty years. He had started in life without much money, what he had coming from his mother whose favourite son he was. But he had gone into business, and had done well, without ever seeming to work very hard: at all events, he had managed to enjoy himself, hunting a little, shooting and coursing a great deal. Then he had married a wealthy widow, and had become quite rich.

When Consuelo came to live at Summer Avon he was past ninety years old, for which meritorious circumstance he was esteemed almost more than for his money. Of his age he liked to talk, but if anyone alluded, ever so remotely, to his being well-off, he grew crusty and suspicious. Nevertheless, he was as proud of his riches as if he had earned them all.

Consuelo was taken to see him the day after her

arrival, and he at once approved of her, and pitied her for having been born in Sicily, where he could hardly suppose she had been properly fed. Her aunts he was apt to snub, especially if they had not called for a day or so, to encourage them to come soon again. He treated Consuelo quite differently. Removed from him by several generations he hardly thought of her as a relation, and was on his best behaviour. He bade her sit in the most comfortable place, in the best chair, and let the aunts do as well as they could in the draught between the window and the door. He made a point of hearing every word she said at once, though Priscilla and Amelia had to scream loudly and repeat every remark, till he begged them not to shout, and hinted that he would not lose much if he failed to catch what they had to say altogether.

All the same, if either of them plucked up courage afterwards to make another attempt he would plunge forward with a,

"What! what! Eh, what's that you're muttering? Speak up, girl," and a quick knitting of his heavy white eyebrows that might have appalled a bolder spirit than Priscilla's.

The frown, however, was dismissed as suddenly as it had been called up, and Uncle Stratford would turn to Consuelo with a fine gentleman air, and beg her to excuse the interruption.

"These girls," he explained, "have lived very close, in this small corner of the world, and have seen nothing and nobody. You must polish them up, my dear. Since my niece was taken to her rest they've had no one to put 'em right. It'll be your duty."

Consuelo was not alarmed by the old gentleman, in spite of his abrupt, pouncing ways, his fiery blue eyes, and prickly white hair, that stood up all over his

head as if he had just seen a ghost. But she was not attracted by the duties he suggested for her.

To do her justice, Amelia was not afraid of him either: when he would choose to hear she could "give him back as good as he gave," as she would say with some satisfaction.

"Consuelo's too pretty behaved to do as you bid her, Uncle Stratford," she now cried in a penetrating treble very unlike her usual voice. "In Palermo the gentlemen don't scold the ladies."

"I can't hear a word she says," said Uncle Stratford; "it's all wa! wa! wa! like a weathercock that's gone rusty. . . . So the gentleman that taught you to ride was a prince, my dear. I didn't quite catch the name."

"It was the Prince of Santa Biagia," said Consuelo, who was not given to adorning her conversation with grand names, but hardly realized how big those she did mention would sound in Chalkshire ears. "He is my mother's brother, and was once the best rider in Palermo. My father never cared much for riding."

"I know he didn't," said Uncle Stratford, who was thinking much less of his late niece's son than of his great-grand-niece's uncle.

Uncle Stratford, had he lived till now, would have plumed himself on being a Radical. As it was, he could only be a Whig, with an intense admiration for the French Revolution, which he thought entirely providential, especially as Providence had wisely confined it to the Continent. With these views he combined, as is not unusual, a deep, though involuntary, admiration for high rank and titles.

He had heard of Earls frequently, and had seen three pretty often, for Chalkminster is blessed by the immediate proximity of that number. But he had

seen them as it were from afar, like comets, or eclipses of the sun. To hear princes spoken of intimately by one who had lived with them as an equal was an experience that he found at once novel and stimulating. His old eyes were sharp, and he had known at once that Consuelo belonged to that aristocratic world which he pursed his lips over and admired. But he was secretly surprised to find into what exalted circles Alured Dauntsey had got himself married: he could not understand his great-nephew's having said so little about it.

Had Mrs. Dauntsey been alive when her son's marriage took place he would very likely have gone more into particulars: writing to his sister he had only said that his wife was Donna Maria Consuelo, daughter of Don Filippo Olivearey, without mentioning the fact that Don Filippo was younger brother of the Principe di Santa Biagia.

Uncle Stratford had, of course, heard of the marriage, but he supposed every Sicilian was Don Somebody, and had not been impressed. When as a very young man Rupert Stratford had gone into business he had been sensible enough to feel that he was doing wisely and right, but his family had been to some mild extent scandalized, for the younger sons had been idle for several generations. He, therefore, affected to himself to think nothing of birth, and to disapprove of the leisured classes. If he had got on and become rich, it was in no way owing to his ancient family: while his excellent wife, who had brought him thirty thousand pounds, was the widow of a banker whose father had kept a shop, and the daughter of an inn-keeper who had married the best mantua-maker in Chalkminster.

If there was plenty of affectation in Uncle Stratford's Whiggery, there was some warmth and reality, too: he

saw poverty and crime around him, and believed that the crime was in nine out of ten cases the wretched daughter of the poverty: and he could perceive that wealth and penury were dangerous neighbours, and had an idea that better laws could set all to rights. He was hard-headed, and thick-headed, too, less ignorant than numbers of his neighbours, much more ignorant than he ever suspected. The weak point in his political optimism was that it fully contented him: private charity he was shy of, esteeming it dangerous and demoralizing. In practice he was pessimistic: no tramp would ever call twice at his door, nor was he prone to open his purse for a poor neighbour. With such laws as he desired there would be no poor neighbours: in the meantime he suspected that they drank. He would give occasionally handsome sums to an institution, but of direct giving to relieve the want beside his door he was very chary. It was the business of the country and the legislature to annihilate distress, not his to mitigate it in isolated instances.

CHAPTER XIII

ON the day after the meet at the Plough Inn, Consuelo went to see Uncle Stratford. She found him sitting in a chair he could wheel about himself, close to a warm red fire, in his well-furnished dining-room, which always smelt of sherry. He dined early and sparingly, and would then sit still and read a newspaper, with keen interest in every question of the hour. He was unlike very old people in that he cared very little about the past.

He welcomed Consuelo warmly, and made much of her: her youth and beauty delighted him, and her distinction flattered him. Squire Dauntsey had told him that Alured had left his child quite sufficiently well off, and that pleased the old man, too. He thought a good deal more of Alured, the testator, than he had ever thought of him in life.

"So you went to see the hounds meet, Mealy tells me. A pretty sight, eh, my dear?"

Consuelo said it was very pretty, but disappointed him by not adding that there was nothing of the sort to be seen in Sicily.

"All the big people there, no doubt?" he suggested.

"I suppose so. There were plenty of smart carriages with smart-looking ladies in them."

"And fine idle gentlemen on horses?"

"They didn't look idle: they seemed very busy."

"All about nothing — yes!" sniffed Uncle Stratford, who had hunted as much as he could afford in his younger days of less assured affluence.

"I like people to be keen if it is only about their amusements," said Consuelo.

"So do I, my dear. You're right. You were right not to mind my being cross with people who are as young as I was seventy years ago."

"I didn't think you cross. But perhaps you were cross because I didn't come to see you yesterday and tell you all about it; I should have come."

"I didn't expect you," declared Uncle Stratford, without the least idea that he was telling a lie. "You were right to do what pleased you."

"It would have pleased me better to have been here," said Consuelo, thinking of the meeting with Jocha on Dogbury Rings. "But I strolled out without much thinking where I was going. . . . You spoke of seventy years ago when you were young."

"I was younger still twenty years before that. I was born in 1739 — that's what I'm dying of."

Uncle Stratford, who looked as well as the Squire, and much more animated, had not the least idea of dying, but he was given to alluding to his own approaching decease as if to cheat Nemesis of her pretext.

"1739! George II was king then."

"Yes, and for one and twenty years after. There was a king over the water as well, and Squire Stratford, my father, used to drink his health — over the bottle that the water was supposed to be in. But I doubt if my father ever looked if there was any in it — he didn't care for water. None of the real gentry did."

"Your father was a Jacobite, then?"

"I suppose so. I was six years old in the '45, and I mind well my father bidding me remember that my name came from Prince Rupert, under whom his great

grandfather had served. If I had lived then I should have been on the other side."

"The Parliament side?"

"Yes, my dear. . . . But let's talk of things more interesting to you. Young people naturally look to the future."

"To their own future — I suppose they do. But as they haven't much past of their own, they like hearing about the past that belonged to other people. I wish you would go on telling me about those far-off days."

But Uncle Stratford was obstinate: he did not love the old times Consuelo wanted to hear about, and he chose to imagine that she asked about them only to please him. Though he was as proud of his great age as if it were all his own doing, he did not like being treated as a very old person.

"There's not much to tell," he declared. "Things were mostly worse and more uncomfortable. . . . Was Lord Idmiston at the meet?"

"Yes. Mrs. Grately of the Hut, in whose carriage I sat, pointed him out when she came back from seeing her brother who keeps the Plough Inn. He has a very red face."

"So he has!" chuckled Uncle Stratford. "And it has cost him as much port wine as would float this room if it were a boat. The Idmiston port is famous, too. It isn't everyone who could afford such a red face as my lord's."

Consuelo, who knew nothing about the old man's politics, could not understand why he should hug himself over the Viscount's devotion to the bottle.

"He looks rather disagreeable," she went on, and Uncle Stratford listened eagerly, ready for another chuckle, "but," Consuelo added, "just as they were all riding off, when everybody was in a hurry and fuss

who should get first, there was a miserable-looking woman with a sick baby in her arms, and two other starved children hanging to her ragged cotton dress. She didn't beg from anyone, and no one took any notice of her: she only watched the rich people, and squeezed her baby up to her cheek. You wouldn't have thought Lord Idmiston had noticed her either — he was in as much hurry as anyone. But he pulled up, and felt for his pocket, which seemed a long way inside his warm clothes, and I saw him give the woman a guinea."

Uncle Stratford had nothing to chuckle about.

"It'll be all drunk up by Sunday," he sniffed. "The woman should go into the Poor House. Lord Idmiston won't come by with his guineas every week. No doubt he felt free after that to ride on and enjoy himself."

"So should I," said Consuelo, who was not in the least afraid of her grandmother's uncle.

She lifted her wonderful black eyes to the old man's pursed up mouth and thence to his hard and clear blue eyes, and he saw that she thought him cantankerous. She was half laughing, and it made him savage to be laughed at.

"Why should the poor depend on the chance of a rich man's feeling generous?" he demanded. "My lord might just as well have been looking on the other side of the road. How about the three starving children then?"

Uncle Stratford had a double set of false teeth, and he snapped them together like castanets.

Consuelo did not tell him that she, too, had spoken to the poor widow, and helped her, so that, even if Lord Idmiston had looked the other way, she would not have gone home penniless.

"Lord Idmiston did not make the poor," she said.

"I don't know about that. If there were no lords, there might be more food for the poor to eat."

"There are many rich people in England who are not lords, I think," Consuelo urged, without the least thought that Uncle Stratford was himself wealthy.

He glowered at her, but she went on quite cheerfully.

"But the point was not that at all. I only wanted to stick up for Lord Idmiston's right to enjoy his sport better for having begun it by being kind."

"Kind! And why should there be any occasion for his red-faced kindness! You said yourself he had a red face. If there were good laws no one would need his kindness."

"Meanwhile the woman and her children are not sorry he was kind. I don't believe the guinea will be drunk up. Not that that matters to his kindness."

This last doctrine took Uncle Stratford's breath away: not to weigh actions by results seemed to him sheer nonsense.

He supposed these must be Sicilian notions: and he thanked Providence he was English, as he did continually, all the time with a strong conviction that his being so was a part of his own excellence. It is soothing to recall one's personal merit, and Uncle Stratford relaxed in the recollection of his British birth. After all, Consuelo was only a foreigner, in spite of her breeding and high connexions. She could not help it.

"In this country," he observed, with condescension, "we do not think it well to encourage bad habits."

"Is it a bad habit being poor?" Consuelo asked on purpose to tease him. She knew quite well what he meant.

Uncle Stratford moved his feet impatiently.

"In England, we reckon it a bad habit to drink," he explained loftily.

His tone implied that in such countries as Sicily all bad habits might be condoned, owing to the moral laxity of the inhabitants.

"In some countries," she observed, "drinking is not a habit at all."

"In Sicily I suppose lords don't have red faces," snapped Uncle Stratford.

"Well, no,—there aren't any lords. But I can't remember any duke or prince remarkable in that way. Sicilians have not often a high colour."

She broke into a low laugh, and laid her pretty fingers on the old man's gnarled and veiny hand.

"How friendly we have grown!" she said. "See how we are quarrelling."

"I believe you did it on purpose."

"So I did. It does you good. You don't get enough exercise for so energetic a person, and it stirs your blood to fight a little. Besides, you were annoyed with me for not coming yesterday, and you wanted to scold me, but were too proud. So I invented this way of letting you do it."

"You're very clever, no doubt," grumbled Uncle Stratford.

But he was not really in a bad temper: especially as he felt sure that Consuelo had talked nonsense in arguing with him.

"I don't understand," he said presently, "what you were doing with Mrs. Grately at the meet. Didn't you say she keeps the Pheasant Inn?"

As a matter of fact, he knew all about Mrs. Grately, and had often refreshed himself, after shooting, at the Hut, when Mrs. Grately's grandfather-in-law had been host. The late Mrs. Rupert Stratford had, in fact,

been in some way related to the Simon Grately of those days.

"She had business with her brother, who is landlord of the Plough, and drove over to see him: and she took with her to see the meet a lady, Miss Mary Lamb, who is staying at the Hut. I had met Miss Lamb the night I arrived here—in fact, she and her friends kindly let me wait in their sitting-room till the lion had finished eating the other passengers by the mail. When she saw me walking in the road all by myself she was so kind to ask me to sit with her in the carriage."

"You ought to have been in a carriage of your own. It is not fit, my dear, for you to go to such places on foot. What were Athelstan and the girls thinking of? Mrs. Grately is a decent woman, but you are not to be obliged to her for a seat in her one-horse shay."

"Of course I ought to have a carriage of my own—with four horses and outriders," laughed Consuelo, as teasing as ever, "just as there ought to be no poor people. Till proper laws are made, and my coach and four is ready for me, I *must* be obliged to Mrs. Grately."

"You're at it again," snarled Uncle Stratford, now in high good-humour. "Sicilian young ladies are evidently taught to be pert."

"It was only when I came here I learned how nieces should behave. You told me the very first day that it would be my duty to improve my aunts: and they don't need it, so I'm doing my best with you."

"It'll take a long time: you'll have to come very often."

"Oh, I don't mind. For a good object I would take any amount of trouble."

But Uncle Stratford was still thinking with disapproval of her going to the meet alone and on foot.

She belonged to the fine folk, though he did not for a moment class himself with them; and it made him cross to think that she should not have gone among them properly. He had a rod in pickle for her aunts and uncle.

"Was there at the meet," he asked, "a young man they call Lord Winterslow?"

"Not that I know of, but there were lots of young men who might have been lords."

"You didn't hear mention of a Mr. Hungerford? Mrs. Grately might have named him. And though most people call him Lord Winterslow he persists in calling himself only Mr. Hungerford."

"No, I didn't hear about him at all. But if he is Lord Winterslow, why does he wish to be called Mr. Hungerford?"

"I don't know the rights of it. There's a story about it: but you seldom get at the truth in such cases. I remember the old Lord Winterslow very well. Winterslow House was one of the big places: but it was burned down just after the old lord died. His eldest son lived mostly in Italy and did not trouble to rebuild it — perhaps he hadn't money enough, for it would have taken a lot to build up a new house at all like the other. Well, that lord who lived at Rome had a daughter but no sons. And when he died everybody supposed his next brother's grandson would succeed: a youth who had been born and bred in India, with plenty of money of his own. And he thought so himself, and came home to England to take up the succession. But he had an uncle, the old lord's youngest son, and some say that he made objection as if there was something the matter with his second brother's marriage; I don't know how it was, I'm sure, but they say the lady was an Indian, and Mr. Hungerford had married her Indian fashion — anyway, when the old

lord, as we called him, was dead, and the next lord was dead, and this young gentleman's father was dead, the lad's uncle is supposed to have raised difficulties. Whether it ever went to the House of Lords for decision I don't know, but perhaps it did go and has not yet been settled, for the House of Lords is very slow always: perhaps it's their judgment the young gentleman is waiting for, but he won't call himself Lord Winterslow any more, though he did when he came home. He lived at first in one of the houses on the estate, which had always been the Dower House, but he moved out of it, and out of his private fortune bought Dace Court, where he lives by himself. He must be a queer young fellow, and I wondered whether you had seen him to-day — Dace Court is not far from here."

Uncle Stratford evidently thought that it was eccentric of this young man to act as he had done, and so did many other people, especially as it was generally considered that his uncle's objection to the marriage of his parents was captious, and could not probably be sustained.

Consuelo was interested, not by the ramifications of a peerage case, but by what she thus heard of Mr. Hungerford.

CHAPTER XIV

ABOUT a week after this visit to Uncle Stratford, Consuelo went a longer walk than usual, and found herself in a country much more thickly wooded than was the immediate neighbourhood of Summer Avon. She had intended calling upon Mary Lamb, and had climbed a steep cart-road that led up to the downs, passing a black-looking desolate down-barn on her way: to her left was a deep gash in the hillside filled with copse. But when she reached the flattened top of the hill and saw the bare white road that led to the Hut she felt disposed to cross it and keep to the downs. Perhaps she did not find herself in a humour for visiting: the wintry sun was bright, the air mild and sweet, and the short turf under her feet much more tempting than the long stretch of featureless road that led up and down many hills to the Hut.

At first the down was sprinkled thickly with black clumps of wild juniper: but after a long dip and a longer rise she found herself in a place of different features. The next horizon was crowned with woodland, and there were large trees dotted here and there between it and her. There was no enclosure or it might have been taken for a park. Not a farmhouse or cottage was in sight though the scattered village of Summer Quick lay behind the ridge in front of her. The trees along it were leafless, so that the white sky showed through their tops like satin behind a black lace.

There was no sound of any kind, for it was a day of windless silence. Once a pheasant had crowed, and the

echo hung still in Consuelo's ears so that she could not tell whether it was some time ago that the shrill noise had broken on the stillness or but a moment or two since.

Presently she came to a knot of trees, three or four together, beeches with silvery smooth boles, and one stone pine. The ground under the beeches was strewn with empty, gaping nutcups, that the wind which had driven their fallen leaves away had not been strong enough to lift. Under the pine-tree there was a faded brown carpet of dry needles.

It was only when she was quite near to him that Consuelo saw someone sitting close to the foot of this tree.

His attitude was peculiar, and, even at the first quick glance, Consuelo was at once struck by something strange in the figure itself.

He was quite young, about Hurdcott's age, that is some two years older than herself: very lightly built, with a sort of boyish slimness. His face was certainly handsome, but darker than her own, and with a different darkness. It was not thin like his body, the jaw was rounded, and the lips were rather full, the cheeks not gaunt though far from fleshy. His hair was cut shorter than was then the fashion, and was intensely black, as were his long, narrow eyebrows. His eyelids were half-closed, and the very long black lashes seemed almost to cast a shadow over them.

What was peculiar in his posture was that it made one think rather of a statue than of a living man: it was hard to imagine that it would change.

The expression of the face carried out this idea of immovable fixity: yet certainly the young man was not asleep. He sat bolt upright, and was not leaning against the tree-trunk though his back was not a foot from it. His hands lay in his lap, lightly crossed, but

the very long, white fingers were not clasped together.

His eyes were but half-closed yet one would at once say that they saw nothing. The lips, which were beautifully shaped, were just parted, and showed the narrowest possible line of white teeth. Were the lips smiling? After looking at them an hour no one could have been sure, and Consuelo's rapid glance could not tell her. A sort of light lay on them: as sometimes on a landscape a light will seem to hover though no sun be visible.

A smile that does not spring from mirth is mostly an expression of a cheerful sweetness, but that which this young man's lips expressed was certainly neither merriment or cheerfulness, it scarcely even suggested sweetness, but only an impenetrable, strange serenity, that had almost a tinge, though not quite a tinge, of placid scorn. Some such look might be imagined on the face of one who dreamed and knew that he was dreaming: of one who knew for unrealities the things he saw in sleep, but who would hold equally unreal whatever show awakening might bring to the judgment of his senses and his intellect.

Consuelo did not, naturally, stand still staring at the young man whose attitude and face seemed to her so strange that she at once was sure he could not be at all like anybody she had ever known. It was only for a few moments that she looked at him, for barely one surprised moment that she stood still. Then she moved on, her footsteps making no noise on the springy carpet of pine-needles: but the picture of the young man remained in her eyes. She could not help wondering who he was, he was so unlike anyone she had ever seen; so totally different from any of the people she had seen at the meet, whom he resembled in nothing except the fact that he was of their social class.

Of that there could be no doubt: everything about him suggested refinement almost exaggerated.

Consuelo could not remember ever before to have seen a face which expressed so much and at the same time explained itself so little. One can usually decide at least whether the expression be agreeable or no, and even that she was not able to do in this instance. The serenity of those lips was almost cruel. She had not walked far before she was overtaken, and found the young man of whom she was thinking at her side.

He turned to her and lifted his hat.

"Are you going to Summer Quick?" he asked. "Because it is quite a mile nearer to go through my shrubberies and little park. I hope you do not mind my asking, but I saw you in front, and this path leads nowhere except to the village. So I overtook you on purpose. Do you mind?"

"I do not mind in the least," Consuelo answered smiling. "I am not, however, going to the village; or going anywhere in particular."

The young man looked disappointed, as if he would have been glad of an excuse to show her the way through his own grounds.

"I started intending to go and see a lady who is staying at the Hut: but when I got upon the downs I changed my mind and walked on aimlessly," she told him. "I live at Summer Avon, and it is time I turned back, for I must be a good way now from home."

"You do not look at all tired: I wish you were," the young man said with unusual frankness. "For then I would ask you to come as far as my house — see, this gate leads into the wilderness — and let me send you home in my carriage."

Consuelo could not help laughing gently. The young man's frankness was like a child's, though his

appearance, however youthful, was not in the least childish.

"As it is I have no excuse for giving you any such trouble," she said.

"Ah, but it wouldn't be trouble. Can I persuade you that you are cold and had better come on and get warmed?"

They both laughed at this, for Consuelo did not look any more cold than tired.

"The only thing left me," he said, "is to ask you to come on for no reason at all, but simply to please me."

Consuelo might well have been sure that she had never in her life met anyone like this young man before. But she did not immediately conclude thence that he must be objectionable.

"Your hospitality is great enough to need no pretext," she said. "Nevertheless, I must go home."

"I wish I were you," he said; "it must be delightful to have a home to go back to."

She had turned, but he turned, too.

"May I walk a little way with you?" he asked, with the same childlike directness that was so hard to treat conventionally.

"Would you mind telling me," he went on, "who are waiting for you there? Brothers or sisters, parents, what?"

"I have no brother or sister: nor parents either."

"Nor have I. That is why I said I have no home. When you send me away I shall go back there," he pointed over his shoulder, "and see no one but servants."

"I have an uncle and two aunts: I'm sorry I can't spare you one of them."

"I would not trespass on your kindness. I have an uncle, too."

"Are you Lord Winterslow?"

"I don't know. I am Basil Hungerford."

"My name is Consuelo Dauntsey. So now we are introduced."

"I never heard of you. You seem to have heard of me."

"Yes. Once."

"May I come to Summer Avon and see you? Then perhaps your uncle and your aunts would bring you to luncheon."

"Certainly you may come; but I do not think my uncle ever goes out to luncheon. I cannot answer for my aunts."

They now passed the tree under which he had been sitting when she saw him first.

"You came this way? You must have come this way. Did you see me?" He enquired, almost as a shy child might.

"Yes."

"I did not see you. What was I doing?"

Consuelo might have answered, "I don't know," as he had answered her when she asked him if he were Lord Winterslow. But she said,

"You did not seem to be doing anything."

He hesitated a moment, and then, with the same half shy manner.

"Did you think I was asleep? You know I did not see you."

"No, I did not think you were asleep: though I knew you did not see me."

He seemed to wish to ask her more, but did not. Only presently he said,

"I hope you did not think me rude?"

"Rude?"

"Well, it is not courteous to sit still and take no notice of a lady. . . . I am glad you did not think

I could see you. But will you mind if I tell you something? I knew you were coming."

"I did not myself know that I was coming."

"You mean that you did not know that you knew."

This sounded so merely nonsensical that Consuelo turned her face towards his quickly, but she could not tell herself that he looked like a man who was talking nonsense.

"One's outward self," he said quietly, "is not always conscious of what one's inward self knows."

"But you said just now that you had never heard of me. How could you know I was coming?"

"It is true that I never heard of you. But it is also true that I came out on purpose to meet you. Never before since I came to live in this place have I gone out knowing that someone was coming towards me. To-day I did. But I did not know which way you would come or who you would be. And when I got to the tree I sat down and . . . became as you saw me. I am often like that. Presently I was told that you had come: and my eyes opened and I saw you. Then I went quickly after you."

All this he said with the grave simplicity of a child who tells a fairy tale which seems to him as real and true as anything in sober fact or history.

"Do you mean," Consuelo asked, "that some voice said, 'She has come'?"

"There is never any voice. No voice tells me that the sun on the hill there is lovely. *It* tells me."

"You can *see* the sun on the hill."

"Yes, that is a thing the eye can act upon. But there are things, facts, truths that no sense, no part of our outward self, can act upon. The inward self is informed without their help."

It was almost inevitable that Consuelo should try to explain to herself the expression she had seen on

his face at first by comparing it with the expression of his face while he spoke. There was a considerable difference or modification. Of course she could now see only half his face as he walked beside her, but even so she perceived that the fixity, the almost scornful serenity was lightened. When he turned to her, so that she could see both his eyes, and all his mouth, what was most obvious was their expression of wonderful gentleness and sweetness.

"When I saw you first," he said, "you were wrapped around: so that I felt wilful in going after you."

Unable to answer, Consuelo could only look at him, as if asking for explanation.

"All about you," he said, almost sadly, "was the Red Mist. As if you were in the light of sunset — and the sun is lying on the hillside."

"What is the Red Mist?"

"A trail of the net across the Eight Fold Path."

As he said this he sighed: and Consuelo found it hard to remember how his lips had looked when she saw him first. The serene intensity of calm, the half-smile of imperturbable aloofness was gone, and in its place was a wistful misgiving.

CHAPTER XV

HURDCOTT had now a rival, not in Consuelo's heart, for her heart was unawakened, but certainly in her thoughts.

It was not possible to meet so strange a person as Basil Hungerford and immediately forget him. It was never her way to forget people, and the tenor of her life was so uniform and plain that its contrast with a man quite unlike anyone she had met before would in any case have affected her.

She did not remember Hurdcott less, but she had Hungerford to think of as well. He had asked leave to come and see her relations, and she supposed he would come at once. When a week went by and he had not come she was puzzled.

Had she been ordinarily conventional, she might have brought herself to task for having allowed their first meeting to have been what it was. As it was, she did not blame herself or him in the least. He was outside the realm of convention, and could not help it.

But he could help stopping away after begging leave to come, and that she could not understand, for she knew nothing of the Red Mist and the Eight Fold Path.

In the course of the week she went to see Uncle Stratford, and he told her that Lord Winterslow's case had been actually submitted to the House of Lords.

"Of course they will take their time about it," he said. "Time is nothing to them. Meanwhile he has the right to call himself Lord Winterslow."

Consuelo smiled to herself. She could not imagine his caring by what name or title he should be called.

"Does it matter much?" she asked.

Uncle Stratford thought her very simple. To be or not to be a peer, seemed to him a thing that it was absurd to speak about as perhaps not mattering.

"I expect," he said, "that you don't know what an English nobleman's position seems to himself."

"I don't believe Mr. Hungerford ever gives a thought to it," she declared.

Uncle Stratford stared. He could only suppose that she was confounding the position of a British Peer with that of a mere foreign noble.

Consuelo thought he was surprised by her expression of any opinion as to the ideas and feelings of someone she did not know. So she said simply.

"I have met him. He is not at all like people in general!"

The old man pricked up his ears. He could not make out how she could have fallen in with Lord Winterslow.

That, however, she did not explain at once. By this time she had heard from her aunts of Uncle Stratford's republicanism, as they called it, and it amused her to perceive with what gusto he thought of a lord. This English peculiarity was new to her, and would have disconcerted her in anyone she cared for especially: but in her aunts and the Squire she saw no trace of it.

"What *is* he like?" Uncle Stratford enquired, warming his big-boned knees affectionately at the fire.

"Do you mean to look at? Well, he is very dark indeed: much darker than I am. Black and white, in fact."

Uncle Stratford looked shocked. He shook his head and inwardly decided that the House of Lords "would

give it against him." It did not occur to him that it must be the young man's skin which was white.

"And," Consuelo added, "he is rather tall, and very slim, with a boyish, almost girlish, figure."

Uncle Stratford shook his head again.

"His hands are extraordinarily long and thin: he has large eyes, quite black, and very gentle. Not exactly sad, but almost. But the most remarkable thing in his appearance is his expression — I cannot describe it, because I do not know what it is."

Uncle Stratford's eyes were very wide open. He had plenty of pedestrian shrewdness. Evidently the young lady had "taken a good deal of notice" of the gentleman she couldn't describe. He would have scoffed at Priscilla or Amelia had they broached any little match-making ideas of their own to him: but he promptly shifted his view about the House of Lords: after all, if Lord Winterslow was the "real man," why should not he have his title? No matter how black and white he might be, his wife would be Lady Winterslow. Uncle Stratford went through a swift and sharp struggle with himself as to his will. Consuelo having something respectable of her own, he had already decided to treat her as a niece, and leave her as much as Athelstan and her aunts. But Priscilla and Amelia were people who would never be the better for an increase of fortune. Consuelo, on the other hand, was a person who would do credit to money, especially if her husband were a nobleman. It occurred to him, however, that some such idea might have entered into her mind, too, and he became rather cross with her.

"We had then better not trouble ourselves about his indescribable expression," he said tartly.

Consuelo flushed slightly; people had never been rude to her. And during the rest of her visit she would say no more about Lord Winterslow. Uncle Strat-

ford was punished, for he was all agog to hear more.

Two or three days after this, Lord Winterslow came to the Manor House, but, as he was announced as Mr. Hungerford, Consuelo introduced him to her aunts by that name.

He behaved like an ordinary well-bred young man, and took the trouble to be pleasant to Priscilla and Amelia: only it seemed no trouble. There was not much in his expression to remind Consuelo of her first sight of him. His eyes were full of intelligence, and had nothing dreamy or remote about them: only there was in them the same suggestion of a rare gentleness, and this was more than carried out by his lips when they were silent. They seemed to tell of an almost painful sensitiveness: as of one who dreaded above all things to inflict pain. Consuelo tried in vain to associate this look with that of imperturbable, half smiling serenity and aloofness.

"Does your niece ever ride?" he asked rather abruptly, turning to Priscilla, to whom he addressed much more of his conversation than to Amelia. It surprised Consuelo to see how he could make her little silent aunt talk. She did not for a moment suspect him of doing it to please herself. Nor did he. It was simply that all weak, helpless creatures appealed to him.

"She used to ride in Sicily," said Priscilla. "She has had no horse here."

"I wish she would let me bring her a horse and ride with me. It is one of the few things I like. I have several horses, but it is dull to ride always alone."

Aunt Priscilla looked at Consuelo, to let her speak for herself.

"But it would be tiresome for you to ride over all the way from Dace Court leading another horse," she said.

"Oh, no! But a groom could bring the other horse," explained Mr. Hungerford, supposing that Consuelo's aunt was thinking of the proprieties, and disapproving of the notion of a tête-à-tête ride. "I do wish you would consent," he added, turning to Consuelo herself.

His boyish manner of pressing what he wanted reminded her of his eagerness to make her go to his house at their first meeting.

"Should you not like it, my dear?" Priscilla asked her: she was always anxious that the girl might have any little pleasure that came in her way. It was her constant fear that Consuelo would find her life with them very dull.

"My niece," she said to Mr. Hungerford, "had so much gaiety in Sicily she must find us very quiet. But she is such a good child she never complains."

"I have nothing to complain of," said Consuelo, laughing. "But I should like to ride with Mr. Hungerford. Then perhaps my uncle will let me keep a horse of my own."

"That's what you ought to do," declared Amelia, who thought her niece should not be beholden to anyone for a chance mount.

"Your aunt talks of Sicily," Basil said to Consuelo; "did you live there?"

"Yes, till a few weeks ago. My father lived in Palermo, and my mother was Sicilian."

"And you? Are you Sicilian or English?"

"I don't know," Consuelo answered, laughing again. "Ask my aunts."

"English, of course," Amelia asserted promptly.

"I often wondered," Consuelo observed demurely. "I feel fairly English: but I did not venture to be sure. And my looks are against me."

Basil laughed a little. She was evidently alive to the placid chauvinism of her father's nation.

"You and I," he said, "are in the same boat. Only my side of it is deeper in the water. Your aunt assures you that you are English. I am afraid my uncle would not be so magnanimous in my case."

"And do you also feel English?"

"In India I suppose I did. Since coming to England I have learned my presumption."

"I do not believe you care in the least."

"I do not."

For a moment, as he looked at her with his face fully turned to her, Consuelo was reminded of the expression she had seen upon it as he sat under the pine-tree. The eyelids drooped, and the serene light of imperturbable indifference came back to the lips that had just spoken. The smile they had worn a few minutes before had not quite died away from them, but it did not now suggest a mere half-mischievous amusement. It rather gave the idea of one who felt the absurdity of caring for anything.

Nevertheless, he seemed to care about getting his own way, and returned to the question of their riding together till he had drawn from her a definite promise, and a day had been fixed.

"I wish," he said, "you would all come over to see me and have luncheon. I have a cook who is forgetting how to cook. I have promised him that he shall have an opportunity of reminding himself. Do help me to keep my promise."

Amelia knew there were pretty gardens at Dace Court, and looked willing to be persuaded. Priscilla was a little flurried: she could hardly trust the hens to lay their eggs punctually in her absence, but she was always ready to oblige, and, if the others thought she ought to go, she would go.

So it was settled that on the day fixed for the riding they would drive to Dace Court. There was at

the Manor House a pony, of which for about fifteen years Priscilla had been a little afraid, though his most spirited irregularity consisted only in a habit of suddenly dipping to the roadside in search of green food: the pony chair was of no known make, but was hung very low on its wheels, which Priscilla thought an advantage, as, in the event of being thrown out, she would not have far to fall.

CHAPTER XVI

ON the day appointed for this unwonted dissipation the aunts were much more excited than Consuelo. Amelia scanned the heavens, and feared it would rain. Priscilla feared it would not. Then she remembered that bad weather would spoil her niece's ride, and felt bound to hope that it would hold up.

By the time Mr. Hungerford and the horses arrived both the aunts were ready to receive him in their best gowns, strongly smelling of camphor. Priscilla, in dove-coloured silk, with her hair properly "done," looked about ten years younger than usual. Amelia, in poplin of a russet hue that went well with her bright brown complexion, was rather beset by a Sunday feeling that she must be going to church.

They saw the riders off, and wondered what they would do till it should be time for the pony carriage to come round.

"She looks well in her riding habit," observed Amelia.

"She always looks lovely," declared Priscilla, with a decision that took herself slightly aback. "There's no denying," she added, "that she is a beautiful creature."

"He thinks so. That's plain enough."

"He couldn't help thinking so. But I didn't notice anything special. He seems to talk most to me. I'm sure he's uncommon civil."

The worldly-wise Amelia laughed.

"My dear Scilla! When young men are that pretty-behaved to aunts, there can't be much doubt the niece is pretty."

Such extreme sagacity flustered Miss Dauntsey a little.

"You think so? Well, I saw nothing of it. See how he pressed *us* to go over and lunch."

"Ta! La! He couldn't ask her to lunch all by herself."

"But, Mealy, I'm sure he seems a most straightforward young fellow."

"Who says he ain't straightforward? There's nothing crooked in a young man's having eyes in his head enough to see when a girl like Consuelo is out of the common for beauty and spirit. I was afraid of my life you'd refuse to go — and the whole scheme would be nipped in the bud."

"Scheme! Gracious me, Mealy! You don't mean that he wants to get us all over there, and pop the question straight out!"

"Pop your grandmother," cried Amelia, with vigorous if obscure rhetoric. "Young fellows don't jump like that. I'm sure it took Sam Blake a twelvemonth, and all he could get out at last (I took him up so) was didn't I think the garden at Cholderton Manor might be made as nice as the garden here if only there was a lady to see to it."

Priscilla sighed a little. She had never felt quite easy as to poor Sam Blake: if he had wanted so badly to marry her sister it seemed a pity she could not bring her mind to it. A broken heart must be fearful — and perhaps it was despair that had made him take Miss Muggins of White Parish, with three thousand pounds and an undeniable squint, within a year of his definite dismissal.

"I hope she'll be guided right," Priscilla murmured. "It's a great responsibility — another person's happiness. And I don't see that she cares for him — no more than she cares for Uncle Stratford."

"If she likes him I hope she'll get him," retorted Amelia. "Let folks look after their own happiness, says I. I'm not half sure he's good enough for her."

Amelia, who knew nothing about republicanism, and had no objection to lords as such, was not in the least dazzled by rank, which seemed to her an accident or a disposition of Providence, like the colours of tulips.

Priscilla in these perplexing circumstances did not know what to hope. It would certainly be terrible if Consuelo were cajoled into marrying someone not good enough for her.

"I doubt he's sly," Amelia added. "When he half shuts his eyes I don't know what he looks like."

"Well, it's all in the hands of Providence," sighed Priscilla, with pious desperation.

Meanwhile Consuelo and Basil were riding along in cheerful unconsciousness of all this doubt and conjecture.

"It was a new revelation of your character," he told her, "to hear of you as a young woman wholly given up to gaiety. It was not my idea of you at all."

"Nor mine. My kind aunts try to insist on my finding myself dull after the fierce excitement of the Favorita on a Thursday or Sunday afternoon."

"What's the Favorita?"

"The king's toy villa in the park outside Palermo—in which are hardly walls enough for all the portraits of Maria Carolina and the princesses. Everyone rides or drives there two or three days a week. There's just room in the gardens for all the carriages."

"It sounds exciting! And you really don't miss it?"

"I sometimes miss my friends. Palermo is a large place, and I was not the only person of my own age there."

She laughed as she said this, but Basil perceived with some complacency that she really felt the lack of youthful companions.

"Well," he observed calmly, "I'm not very old. . . ."

"You are as young as possible: but you are not a girl."

He laughed gently, and said,

"Would you believe that I myself have *never* had anyone of my own age as a companion? Till I came here my home was in the Mofissal of the Gangetic Delta: all the land around for miles belonged to my father till he died, four years ago, and then it all belonged to me. Scarcely anyone ever came to see us: when they did come they were elderly. I never went to school."

"Perhaps you had a tutor, was he also old?"

"My father was my tutor. He was not old, but he was older than me."

"Didn't you go to church? Perhaps the clergyman was elderly, too."

Basil paused a moment, and said quietly,

"I never went to church. I am not a Christian."

Consuelo did not jump, as her aunts would undoubtedly have done had such an announcement been made to them in cold blood. Probably no such declaration had been made in Chalkshire for thirteen hundred years. But even Consuelo heard it with an odd sensation that she could not immediately get rid of.

He fancied that she was repelled, and said gently,

"One must tell the truth. Are you — does it make you dislike me?"

His gentleness was full of a humble eagerness.

"I would hate to shock you," he went on in the same low, quiet voice. "Is it the first time you ever spoke to someone who was not of your faith?"

"Oh, no! But it is the first time I ever heard anyone say that he did not believe in Christianity."

"I could hardly tell you sooner. Nothing brought it up. Do you think I ought not to have made friends with you till you knew? I should hate you to think I wanted to deceive you."

"I am sure you would never deceive anyone. After all, you have as much right to your religion as I have to mine."

"Some people would tell you that mine is no religion: only a philosophy."

"Every faith, right or wrong, is a religion which teaches God."

"God is a word," he said, repeating, oddly enough, something she herself had said. "It is a word that does not occur in the teaching of the Awakened One."

"But some other word meaning the same thing?"

"What do *you* mean by it?"

She tried to tell him, shyly, for the need of theological definitions was new to her.

"Ah! But what do you mean by a person? You and I are persons. Is your meaning of God like that?"

"You and I have bodies. He has none. He is a Spirit."

"I cannot picture a spirit: but I fancy you picture God, though I know you do not make pictures of him. In the teaching of the Awakened One there seems to be but one person."

"There is only one God."

"Ah, yes. But you would say there are many other things. To me there is only one thing. At first I also thought there were myriads of thing, living and without life. Then it came to me that there is Only One — The Great Self: and that in every part of it there is life."

"In rocks, for instance?"

"Yes. In whatever things there may be in undiscovered stars which might seem more lifeless than rocks. In rocks are only myriads of atoms imprisoned but not inert, all moving within the shackles of the rock's shape, all capable of getting free, destined to get free at last, and go on from life to life."

"If there is only one thing, how can there be law? Law must have a lawgiver, and at least one outside the lawgiver to whom it is given."

"That is a good argument. But your notion of law and mine would be different. Your lawgiver punishes the law-breaker: because both are what you call persons, and there is offence. The lower has offended the higher. If you like I will grant that in the philosophy of the Awakened One there is no idea of law — sin is a Christian theory, based on the notion of a personally made law."

"Then in the teaching of him you call the Awakened One there is no morality."

"None whatever in your sense of it. 'If you are immoral you will be whipped with many stripes' is your way of it. Mine is, if you are immoral, you will be immoral till you become moral. Consequence, result, not what you call punishment, is our notion of it."

"Is there such a thing as duty?"

"There is necessity. The necessity of never ceasing, though continually delayed, progress from whence one came whither one must return."

"I do not," confessed Consuelo frankly, "understand you."

"Duty implies a multiplied personality. For duty there must be at least two existences, separate, and one of them superior to the other. Necessity is only a word for the way one thing must exist."

"You talk of the teaching of the Awakened One.

How could he teach if there be only One Universal Person? Teaching implies at least two persons quite as much as law, the one who knows and the one who is taught to know."

Basil did not answer this. Perhaps, as Dr. Johnson would have said, he had nothing ready. Instead he asked her with a sort of suddenness,

"Are you accustomed to think of these things?"

"No," she replied, "it is the first time they have been put to me."

He seemed surprised, and almost mortified.

"I have always been thinking of them," he said. "I was not *taught* the theories of the Awakened One. They came to me bit by bit. My father married a Burmese lady, who was, of course, a Buddhist. I barely remember her. He himself was English, and naturally a Christian — so far as he was anything. After my mother's death he quarrelled with a clergyman, and resolved that I should not be brought up in the Christian faith. So I was given no religion at all. There was no one to teach me Buddhism, and perhaps he did not intend me to learn it. I do not think he had any intentions on the subject, one way or the other. His mind was clear, but hard and positive, with no mystical bent: I daresay he supposed that I could easily grow up without religion of any kind. He taught me good behaviour, and for a long time I never wondered what was the object or obligation of right conduct. He must have been glad that I did not worry him with questions. As I grew older, and read history, and so on, the name of religion had to be learned, but he explained it as a system of partly true, partly arbitrary ethics, devised by rulers and priestly castes whose motive was, on the one hand, to lend a high sanction to law and government, on the other, to increase their influence and practical power.

From no one else did I hear anything about it, for Hindu servants are not in the habit of talking to Europeans about religion."

Here Basil paused and asked Consuelo if all this was tedious to her:

"Of course not; go on, if you will, please," she said sincerely. She could very well perceive that he liked to talk about himself, whereas she was not given to talking of herself.

CHAPTER XVII

“NEXT to the room that was first my nursery and then my schoolroom,” Basil continued, “was that which had been my mother’s boudoir. My father never went there, but he found out I often sat in it, and made no objection. It was a pretty room, and I liked being in it. It had a soft, sweet fragrance which I imagined to be the perfume of my mother left behind, as the odor of a rose lives on when the rose is dead. Against one wall, on a sort of altar, was a large bronze statue of the Awakened One: seated, as usual, with half shut eyes, and lightly crossed, slender hands. On the pedestal was a long inscription of Burmese character which I could not read — I did not try to read them for a long time: I only tried to read the statue, its attitude, its face; the meaning of the barely open eyes, the gentle, indifferent lips, the idle hands. I read many books, but none of them interested me so much as the statue I could not read. At first my father had not willingly given me books, but would read out of them to me himself, often omitting parts. When he saw that I was ready to accept what he told me about religion, their worldly, selfish origins and hatred of freedom, he let me have the books — histories, romances, poems: and I found in all the same things. History seemed the tale of a monotonous variety of ambitions, its poor rags hung to the pegs of war and intrigue. Romances were the tales of sorrow born of love, the love that desires, and quenches its agonies at last in the selfish waters of possession. Poetry when loveliest was one sigh of wistfulness — all these rested

on one common base struggle for a thing desired, or lamentation that it was unattainable or lost. Sorrow and strife all came from one source — desire. From my books I went back to my mother's room: and there I always found the serene figure, expressing, above all, silence. What it meant I grew to understand by perceiving what it did not mean. Trouble, anger, pride, uneasiness, pain, sorrow, disappointment, disgust, were all absent — because desire was absent. . . . One day I sat down close to the seated figure, and my eyes were fixed upon it, till they were half closed like its own. The lips seemed to relax: the half-smile — if it were so much as half a smile — deepened, not into a full smile, but to a more profound serenity. They were not sorrowful, I cannot say they were even compassionate — for compassion is the voluntary adoption of another's pain — and they were deliberately indifferent: as if they knew that sympathy is the make-shift anodyne, not the final cure of sorrow, the radical cure must be indifference — till desire dies, pain and grief must be immortal: shifted hither and thither, never annihilated. '*Desire Nothing*,' was the message of the imperturbable lips."

"Do you mean," Consuelo asked, "that the lips spoke?"

"Speech! What do you mean by it? They were not human lips, with human breath to move them," Basil answered impatiently. "It was a bronze statue. But he whom the figure represented taught me through it, to desire nothing."

"'To desire nothing' may mean two opposite things: Not to desire at all: or to desire nothingness."

Basil again seemed half mortified.

"Your verbal dexterity," he said, "is surprising if you really never thought of these things before."

"I never did."

She did not now ask him to go on. But the theme was too agreeable to let go, and he went on unbidden.

"The message meant both the meanings you suggest," he declared.

"They are incompatible," she answered, with a conviction that again annoyed him. "To desire nothingness is itself a desire."

"It is a hunger like all desires. But its satisfaction extinguishes all subsequent desire."

"Because nothingness is not. If nothingness could be reached, happiness would be as much absent as pain. It is more noble to be and suffer than not to be."

"In existence there are grades of nobility. In non-existence there is neither nobility nor ignobleness — only peace."

"In nonexistence there can be no more peace than there can be ignobleness. Peace is a condition of being. Nonexistence, if it could be regained, would only end pain because it ended everything — it could not bring peace."

Basil was disappointed, almost annoyed: he had taken it for granted that Consuelo would be impressed even if unconvinced. He now suspected that she found his reasonings incomplete and inconclusive.

"We have slipped into argument," he observed with an obvious, again boyish, attempt to regain the upper hand of their talk. "That the Awakened disapproved. All discussions and argument he forbade as leading to sore feeling, to a disturbance of peace."

"But if he desired others to come to agreement with him who were not originally of his mind, he must have argued, or else simply laid down the law."

"He spoke only with his disciples."

"That merely handed on to them the business of argument. And what made them his disciples?"

"Conviction of the truth of his teaching."

"What convinced them?"

"The teaching itself and the teacher himself."

"They were ready to think what he thought, because he thought it? His own sanctity, I suppose, was the proof of his being right. That I can imagine in them: but you never saw him. For you the teaching must have proved itself by argument."

"I never argued: even with myself. I appreciated. But you and I are still arguing."

Consuelo might have said that she had not begun it: instead she only laughed lightly, and begged him to go on telling her about himself. This he was quite willing to do.

"Very well," he said, "I will try and make you understand how all this grew in me. My first step was the appreciation of the one sovereign truth that all the trouble of men comes from desire. I then perceived that desire itself springs from the separate rival personalities of mankind — from the multiplicity of selves, or the ignorance that imagines such multiplicity and rivalry. Once it should be realized that there is but one universal self these wounds and bruises of rivals would cease. The work of life must therefore be the gradual merging of individual self, or escape from the snare of separate consciousness: in other words, attenuation of that which seems self, by abdication of individual desire: the reduction of separate sense of being till all sense shall have ceased."

Consuelo now made no comment, since comment would have seemed argument.

"Thus far," Basil continued, not without complacency, "I travelled alone. Soon, however, it became obvious to me that in one lifetime there would not be space for the completion of such a work."

"Would not death complete it?"

"Death completes nothing. If death found the task half finished, unfinished it would be, unless after death a further opportunity were offered. So far I had read nothing of the teaching of the Awakened: not even the brief summary of his word that was engraved on the pedestal of his statue, for I could not read it. It was, however, easy to guess that the inscription was in Burmese, seeing that the image had been my mother's, and had, doubtless, been brought by her from Burmah. I copied it out, and asked my father if he could decipher it. He did so, and it proved to be the formula of the Eight Fold Path."

"What is the Eight Fold Path?"

"I will tell you presently. It was a revelation, but not of that which I specially needed then. Later on I persuaded my father to teach me what he knew of Burmese, and after a while I was able to read the few books my mother had left behind. From them I learned the whole teaching of Our Lord Buddha as he left it: and among the rest the Karma."

"What is that?"

"That there is an endless-seeming but steady progression. That that which death leaves incomplete is completed at last, by means of a long series of re-incarnations. You begin where death left you, starting afresh through another incarnation on the road you left but partly travelled: and so on through another and another, till, more and more attenuated, the separate unreal self regains absorption into the One Great Self, and so all desire has ceased. When everything that lives has reached the goal, in unimaginable time, then universal Peace will reign."

Consuelo had listened to every word. When he stopped she was still silent.

"You say nothing," he complained, in an injured tone.

Nothing was so odd in him as his boyish petulance contrasted as it was with the serene self-satisfaction with which he told her of his philosophy of serenity. This boyishness, however, was too human for her to find fault with.

"I am afraid of arguing," she answered, smiling. "Still more of carping."

He really wished her to admire rather than to criticize, but now he had finished, he wanted to hear her talk, and so he begged her to say what was in her mind.

"To begin at the end, then. You describe a Final Universal Reign of Peace. I cannot understand a reign where there are no subjects. A Universal Self cannot be a triumphant Monarchy. Rebels subdued to loyalty are still separate beings. Then the Karma. It strikes me as an idea that occurred to him whom you call the Awakened, or to someone else, to explain a difficulty. The Catholic doctrine of Purgatory seems to me to explain it more simply. And, last of all, to go back to your initial axiom, its simplicity is, I can see, alluring: you say, 'All trouble that has vexed the race of man springs from desire,' and all desire from separate entity or supposed entity — a blind and senseless rivalry. I agree this far, all sorrow and struggle come from rivalry — from one man's false notion that his best good is at war with another man's. But the answer does not seem to me to be your answer."

"And your answer?"

"That the rivalry is indeed blind and senseless — for the best interest of each man is the best interest of every man. If each would pursue his own best good he would be advancing the best good of all men alive or dead. That the true interests of men are not warring but identical. I do not agree that all trouble

comes from desire, but from wrong desires. That is, the desire of what is not really good, but temporary, and so ultimately useless. All the trouble you perceive so plainly is born of man's vulgar preference of what is temporary and at hand, to what is eternal."

"What is your universal, identical human interest which all right desire should aim at?"

"The only Eternal — God."

It was with plain reluctance that she mentioned the Ineffable Name to one who had apparently no belief in it. But she could not answer him and leave It unsaid.

"Now," he said, after a pause in which he debated with himself whether he would reply to her answer — whether he could do so without arguing, "I will tell you what is The Noble Eight Fold Path. Right Thought, Right Aspiration, Right Method of Life, including right behaviour and right speech, Right Endeavour, Right Mindfulness, and Right Bliss. By this Aryan eightfold way the goal is reached."

"And what is the Red Mist?"

Basil answered reluctantly, and with a faint colour rising in his pale cheeks.

"Love which is turned aside to one object."

He was not eager now to dilate and explain. On the contrary, he seemed relieved by the occurrence of a necessary diversion; for the two aunts in their pony-chair appeared round a corner, and it was necessary that he and Consuelo should ride up to them, and keep with them as far as the house.

CHAPTER XVIII

DACE COURT is a fair-sized house, plain, with a few good rooms which derive a sort of fictitious importance from the fine entrance-hall and staircase. It stands well at the head of a shallow gorge, the lower end of which spreads out into a little park with large trees: beyond the park the ground slopes up again to a wooded ridge. All the ground floor rooms open from each other by square arches supported on Corinthian columns: and they had all been well furnished in the style of a house of consequence before Basil bought it as it stood.

He did the honours well, though he could have been little in the habit of receiving visitors, and the aunts liked seeing his pretty things: he seemed to know a great deal about old china, especially Oriental porcelain: and he was able to talk as if he knew all that was worth knowing about ivory carvings and Flemish pictures, tapestry and old silver. He evidently took pleasure in his possessions, and Consuelo saw no reason why he should not. She did not notice that he glanced her way now and then half apologetically.

Once, when Priscilla and Amelia were staring respectfully at a panel-picture on wood of a Dutch interior and endeavouring to see its merits, he came up to her and said in a low voice,

“Do I seem to you inconsistent?”

He was almost blushing, and his boyish anxiety for her favourable opinion would certainly have disarmed criticism had she been disposed to it.

"I do not even know why you should seem inconsistent."

"I thought that perhaps you would accuse me of caring for trivial things. . . ." He laughed a little, and explained, "You said that man's trouble came from the desire of temporary things: I cannot exactly pretend that porcelain and carved ivories are eternal. But *really* I do not *care* for these slight things. They please the surface of myself — taste, and the eye — that is all. I like them here as I like the trees and the sky outside. They do not matter. . . ."

He brought her a very beautiful, fragile bowl of egg-shell china, and began to point out its excellences.

"Perhaps," he told her, "it is unique. I like to think of its unknown history."

He made her take it into her hands to examine, and she did this reluctantly; it seemed too delicate to handle without risk.

Just then a gong sounded, and a greyhound that lay asleep on the rug before the fire jumped up with lively interest.

"How greedy you are, Lufra, that is only the first gong," Basil said, but the dog, hearing no scolding in his voice, bounded across the room and jumped up on him just as he took the china bowl back from Consuelo. He held it so lightly that it fell from his fingers onto a small marble table standing between Consuelo and himself.

The lovely specimen of priceless china lay shattered into atoms, and Lufra shrank to the ground covered with shame.

At the sound of the crash the aunts turned quickly round, Priscilla trembling as she would at any sudden noise.

"Dear, dear! the beautiful bowl!" she exclaimed, in accents of almost tragic sympathy.

Amelia's bright, dark eyes expressed a strong desire to slap the author of the mischief: she always disapproved of dogs as "very poor gardeners."

Basil instantly dropped down and sat on the floor beside the abashed Lufra, making much of her.

"Don't worry about it," he said, "you couldn't help it. It was an accident. Cheer up, *please*. Really, it doesn't matter, *really*."

Lufra was hard to convince; but her master went on assuring her that it did not matter in the least till she allowed herself to believe that she had not been naughty.

Amelia felt some inward willingness to slap the master as well as the dog: but Priscilla only thought him very amiable.

"Poor dumb creature," she murmured, "she couldn't know how much the bowl was worth. I'm sure she'd go without her dinner if it would give Mr. Hungerford another."

At the word dinner Lufra's ears betrayed a recognition that argued something short of philosophic indifference.

"I'd let her go without her dinner, whether or no," Amelia observed, as if she meant it.

"Meanwhile it *was* the first gong," said Basil, "and perhaps you ladies would like to go upstairs and wash your hands. I will ring for the housekeeper to take you up."

Priscilla and Amelia half expected to see a mahogany or ebony female in a turban. But a comfortable and undoubtedly English matron presently appeared and led them upstairs.

It astonished Priscilla to see how excellently kept

this bachelor's house was. There were no dirty corners on the staircase and the bedroom to which she and Amelia were conducted looked fit, as she observed to herself, for a queen to go to bed in.

Having seen that the aunts had all they wanted, the housekeeper led Consuelo to an adjoining room, and then left her.

On a marble table Consuelo saw a bronze statue, and at once felt certain that it represented him whom her host spoke of as the Awakened One. The term almost made her smile, for the expression of the figure was certainly not that of vigilance. Imperturbable repose was the thing expressed, a serenity above all emotion, even the noblest.

Consuelo stood before the image and regarded it with an interest only partly due to the long conversation she had that morning had with Basil. In any case, she felt sure that the expression of the bronze face would have explained that of Basil when she had first seen him under the pine-tree.

To some extent it repelled her: so absolute a calm could not but seem to her heartless, and yet it was not cynical: only ineffably aloof and passionless as of one who sat above the sorrow and pain of men in an impregnable isolation. Undoubtedly the features had a certain beauty, though it was not the beauty of any admitted type of perfect form. She could not deny that the face was noble, and the attitude full of a subtle dignity. She supposed that as a work of art, the statue must be of high excellence, and yet its merit must chiefly consist in the singular achievement of a traditional ideal.

It was the first time she had ever seen an image of Gotama, and of Buddhism she knew scarcely more than the name. Still she was aware that hundreds of millions of men were living then, thousands of millions

had lived and died, in the faith of his teaching. It was not, therefore, possible for her to study the image without a deep and wondering interest and conjecture.

As she looked, the memory of the crucifix arose in her mind, and it was inevitable that she should compare or contrast.

On the one hand was a man who had never claimed to be more than man, withdrawn from men, and all man's agony, seated in passionless aloofness as on a throne, crowned with a serenity attainable only by an indifference less human than that of Olympus: a man whose teaching, as she had just been told, came to this, that man's purpose and aim must be to escape from his humanity by many lives of ever more and more attenuated manhood: nay, more, to wear out by patient effort each link in the chain of all being till non-being should be attained for final goal. On the other hand, God in exile: God, Who, by an unimaginable exercise of the prerogative of omnipotence had deliberately become man, for the astounding purpose of being able to suffer: Who abdicated the throne of removal from all pain with set intent, that He and those beneath Him might be brought together in the mystic union of sorrow and sufferance: Who had created all things that they might be—unwilling to keep to Himself the imperial majesty of existence. The whole object of this outward action, to share being with others: and to teach the way whereby being might be raised higher and higher till it most nearly likened itself to its initial source and prototype.

On the one hand, a teacher whose lesson was that existence itself is the fount and spring of misery: escape from it back into nothingness the only chill remedy. On the other, a pattern of existence at its best, calling all to follow and share, with the austere but noble invitation to perfection, so that all which is

not real, but temporary and fictitious may be sloughed off, and what is eternal and actual be left untrammelled and unstained. She thought of the sublime familiarity of St. Mary Magdalene of Pazzi's outcry, "Of a truth Thou hast made a fool of Thyself, O Christ, for the love of men!" and it seemed to her that all the wisdom of the "Awakened One" lay in indifference, all the folly of the Cross in Love.

Consuelo turned away from the image of Gotama with a more decided consciousness that it repelled her than she had experienced when she first considered it. But her nature was candid and averse from prejudice: she reminded herself that, after all, it was but some other man's presentment of what he conceived the Buddha to have been, and she was acute enough to surmise that Basil might have been more desirous of giving expression to his own ideas than scrupulous in accurately stating the philosophy of the teacher he claimed as authority.

Nor did she in the least suspect Basil of any deliberate onslaught on her own faith: he had none of the zeal of an apostle. He was wonderfully indifferent to the beliefs of others: and much more complacent in his own sense of philosophy than convinced that everybody else should adopt it. In reality, though of that Consuelo could only have a shrewd instinct, he had but a superficial knowledge of the teaching of Buddha, which differed in essential points from his own "appreciation" of it.

At luncheon Consuelo perceived that he ate none of the excellent fare provided for his guests, confining himself to certain curries made of vegetables, and a salad of celery leaves and oil.

Later on he explained this.

"The Awakened One," he said, "bids his followers destroy no life: and so we eat no flesh."

"But you say there is one life in all things."

"Yes. And therefore I eat nothing which interrupts the procession of life: not even bread, for that is made of the fruit of corn, which, left unhurt by me, can continue unmolested its onward march of life. I eat only the leaves of plants in which their principle of life is not centred."

"But you gave us meat to eat."

"Because you would eat it in any case: in your own house or mine makes no difference. I would not kill the meat for you."

Meanwhile, Priscilla and Amelia enjoyed the good meats his cook had provided, without the least uneasiness as to interruption of the procession of life.

"Poor young man!" they observed to their niece, when, at home, they were talking over their outing, "he must have a wretched digestion. He only picked a bit of green food, and some queer mess that looked like stewed grass. His stomach must be too weak for butcher-meat."

"I doubt that's what makes him such a poor colour," added Amelia. "It's a pity, though, when a young fellow's faddy about his eating: it grows on people. That's the worst of having no woman to laugh him out of his whimsies. I daresay a mutton-chop would set him up instead of hurting him. When folks eat queer, they act queer. If he'd take a good slice off the joint, and perhaps a leg or so of pheasant, he'd not be lolloping on the floor, begging his dog's pardon for having broken a handsome piece of china."

"Well, I thought it very pretty in him," said Priscilla. "Some young men would have kicked the poor dumb creature that knew no better, and cursed, too."

"And I'd rather see it," declared Amelia. "'Twould be more natural. I know I gave the dog a sly kick under the table myself, and I wonder the spoiled thing didn't yelp."

"If anyone should have yelped it was me," said Consuelo, laughing, "for I got the kick. Lufra was on the other side of my leg."

"Well, well, wait till he's got a wife," observed Priscilla, "and he'll not be so taken up with his dog, I daresay."

"I can't imagine him with a wife," Consuelo declared. "I should think he would hate to be married."

The aunts made such conscientious efforts not to exchange glances as to give them quite a guilty and hangdog appearance. And Amelia, anxious to say something unconnected with the subject, remarked:

"I noticed none of the servants my-lorded him, and he calls himself 'Mr. Hungerford': but Uncle Stratford says he's Lord Winterslow unless the House of Lords fights shy of him on account of his being half Indian: that's another reason why he shouldn't be queer. An English lord should eat roast beef, and not puff himself out with leaves and rubbish."

"I don't believe he cares at all whether he is Lord Winterslow or whether he isn't," said Consuelo.

She thought she understood that his indifference was part of his philosophy. But of his philosophy she did not discourse with her aunts.

CHAPTER XIX

UNCLE STRATFORD had been much excited when told by Amelia that the three ladies were going to lunch at Dace Court, though he only received the news with a grunt, and hinted that such gaddings about were but a foolish occupation for persons of her and Priscilla's time of life. He would snub them at one moment as if they were forward children, and five minutes afterwards try to make them profess recollections that would make them nearly his own age.

"Consuelo couldn't go to Dace Court without us," Amelia reminded him.

"And why should she go? I suppose you think Lord Winterslow is going to marry your niece!"

"He might do worse. But I'm not so sure she'd have him."

"Pooh! Getting married is all girls think of."

"It's what *she* never thinks of, anyway," Amelia protested warmly.

"What else has she got to think of, shut up with you and Priscilla like a spring chicken with two old hens? She'd be a fool to say No if this young lord asked her to say Yes."

Amelia did not enjoy being called an old hen, or choose to hear her sister thus described.

"I wish *you* were a lord," she observed, with her nose in the air, "you'd know better than to speak rudely of women."

On the day after their luncheon-party Priscilla went to report herself to the old man. Amelia would not go, because she knew he would be all curiosity, and her

sister was not so good as herself at telling all about things.

"And what," Uncle Stratford enquired, "did my lord's grooms think of White Heather and the pony-chair?"

"I'm sure I don't know; I didn't see the grooms — not to speak to. Mr. Hungerford gave the pony sugar to eat, and talked to it as if it was a Christian."

"Oh, you hadn't a word to throw to the grooms: so taken up with my lord, as you were: they expected five shillings apiece, and didn't get even a Thank-you."

"Amelia gave the man something — I don't know if it was five shillings, or what. There was only one."

Priscilla relapsed into nervous silence, and took off her gloves and put them on again.

"If you're too hot keep your gloves off: if you're cold, warm your hands at the fire, and don't fidget," requested Uncle Stratford, as though addressing a tiresome child. "So that's all there's to say of your day in high society!"

"It didn't seem like high society: it seemed . . ."

"Well, and what did it seem like? Lunching with the dairyman? Why didn't Mealy come? She can give some notion of a thing without cross-questioning. I hope she didn't prowl about in the gardens and steal cuttings? There nothing big folks dislike so much as those marauding ways. But no doubt she got hold of something, and so she stops at home to plant her slips and that."

Priscilla made a queer little deprecatory sound, that might well have been lost on anyone so deaf as Uncle Stratford could be when he liked. But it was not lost on him.

"Don't mew, for goodness' sake," he entreated. "If you've anything to tell, tell it out. If not: go away and . . ."

At this moment Consuelo walked in, and Uncle Stratford called out,

"Here's your aunt describing all your fine doings like a page out of the Court Journal. Sit down and let's hear a reasonable account of it."

Consuelo laughed, and, perceiving how the land lay, resolved to be tiresome.

"Well, Lord Winterslow, as you call him, though he never calls himself so, showed us his coronet, which doesn't fit: so I made him a pad of brown paper to keep it on with. And he whipped the footmen for not saying 'my lord' often enough. And when they cried, Aunt Priscilla drank her sherry the wrong way, and so we came away. . . . What else did you want to know?"

"You're pert, miss!" Uncle Stratford declared, with a chuckle that restored Priscilla to animation.

Then Consuelo told him all about it.

"There really isn't much to tell," she said. "Mr. Hungerford came over on horseback about twelve o'clock with a spare horse for me: and we rode. Aunt Priscilla and Aunt Amelia drove over later and we met them just outside the lodge gate."

"No doubt my lo'—Mr. Hungerford—was impressed by the stud you keep at the Manor House. I warrant he has nothing in his stables like White Heather."

"He was very civil to White Heather: and White Heather didn't kick or bite him: it's pleasant to see pretty manners in elderly animals."

Uncle Stratford growled, and Consuelo, with an innocent lifting of her eyebrows, went on calmly,

"Before luncheon we were shown Mr. Hungerford's pictures and pretty things, and his dog broke an apple-green bowl of egg-shell china, which made Aunt Amelia kick me under the table in mistake for the real culprit."

And we ate our food, and then went out to see the gardens and greenhouses, but had to come in because a gentleman and lady came to call. Lord Bemerton and Lady Somebody Something. They had ridden over from somewhere on the other side of Chalkminster."

"Lord Bemerton," said Uncle Stratford, "is the eldest son of the Earl of Tenby, and I expect the lady was his sister, Lady Marjory Vaughan. Lord Tenby is the biggest man about here."

"Lord Bemerton is also rather big. His hands and feet were some of the largest things I ever saw. But he was nice, and has just returned from Sicily. He spent five weeks at Palermo, and knows heaps of people I know — especially my cousins, the Della Corda . . ."

"I don't remember the name," interrupted Uncle Stratford; "have you mentioned them before?"

"I think I have spoken of Cica — the youngest of the girls. Lord Bemerton says she is going to marry the Duke of Monte Cremona . . . I wanted to hear all about it, but we had ordered the pony carriage, and it came round while he was talking, so we came away. However, Lord Bemerton says he will bring his mother over to see us. She knows Palermo, too."

"And what did they call your host? Not 'Mr. Hungerford' surely?"

"They did not call him anything, at least, Lady Marjory didn't. Lord Bemerton said 'I say' or 'Look' or 'Here.'"

On the whole, Uncle Stratford was satisfied, though he would have liked to hear more details.

"And how," he enquired, "did your aunts behave among all the big wigs? I suppose Amelia was perky, and Priscilla looked as if she'd stolen the spoons."

"Aunt Amelia said she had an uncle who didn't like

lords: and Lord Bemerton said, 'Do you mean to eat'?' "

"You are perky, anyway," the old man snapped out savagely.

"Only when you are silly. I can't understand all this fuss about lords. In Sicily it doesn't make any difference having a title or not having one: people are gentlemen and ladies or they aren't, and that's what matters to those who have to meet them. Should *you* have a fit if Lord Winterslow, as you will call him, were to walk in now?"

A loud ring at the door-bell caused Priscilla to say, "There's Amelia . . ."

"And now I shall have two women to stand up to," declared Uncle Stratford, in reality rather relieved, as he was not a bit afraid of his own niece, and had some awe of hers.

The dining-room door was presently thrown open, and Uncle Stratford's venerable housekeeper announced,

"Mr. Hungerford."

Uncle Stratford gave a start, and jumped into a smile of flattered welcome.

"May I introduce myself?" Basil asked, coming forward to take the old man's hand. "I am Basil Hungerford, and I walked over to see your nieces and enquire if they had survived the fatigues of visiting me yesterday. I met Mr. Dauntsey in the village, and he said I should find the ladies here . . . in fact, he brought me to the door. Was I indiscreet to come in?"

"Sit down, sir, sit down: Priscilla, give Lord Winterslow your chair. I am glad to see you, sir . . . I remember your grandfather very well."

Priscilla was quite meek enough to give anyone her place, but Consuelo and Basil took good care she should not stir, and the young man found himself a chair with-

out disturbing anyone. Uncle Stratford eyed him shrewdly, and decided that, though dark, he was by no means black.

After some brief, courteous enquiries of the two ladies Basil devoted himself to the old gentleman: on such occasions he had none of the complacent air of egoism that he was apt to show when tête-à-tête with a good listener.

Uncle Stratford did not have a fit: he only glowed with satisfaction. He was sure the House of Lords would "give it" in favour of this well-mannered young man. It was, he felt, like Amelia's nonsense to pretend that Consuelo would say No if so desirable a suitor should beg her to say Yes. Uncle Stratford himself would have said Yes to any request Mr. Hungerford might make — unless he should ask for his vote. As he would, no doubt, be presently declared a peer there was not much fear of that.

"You remember my grandfather. Of course you remember his house?"

"Why, it was burned down very recently," Uncle Stratford protested, as if he had been asked to remember the week before last. "Not more than twenty years ago, eh, Priscilla?"

"It seems a good while," Priscilla observed humbly.

"My niece can't remember twenty years ago," Uncle Stratford longed to say: but he was on his good behaviour, and only grunted.

"I believe it was very big. Was it an interesting house?" Basil enquired. "I have a quaint print of it. It looks like a nice old place."

"It was," Uncle Stratford replied in an impressive tone, "a larger house than Sheepwash Castle."

"Oh! Lord Sheepdom asked me to dinner. If it was like Sheepwash I don't mind its being burned down. Sheepwash Castle is like a lunatic asylum—not that

it would matter much to me, for I don't suppose my uncle would ask me there if he lived in it."

"But surely, my lord, you do not think your uncle will succeed in his appeal to the Upper House?"

"I don't know at all: and I don't care much. Since he wants to be Lord Winterslow it's a pity if he can't be. I thought I was Lord Winterslow for a good many months, and then he said I wasn't, and I didn't find it made any difference."

"But, my lord, sir, the estates will go with the title, I doubt. It couldn't be right to let them go!"

Uncle Stratford almost groaned as he shuffled in his chair and tried to realize the point of view that could pretend indifference to nine thousand a year. But Basil was not pretending: in that he was perfectly sincere. With more than sufficient wealth for his simple tastes he did not care about an additional nine thousand a year, which somebody else was nearly going crazy about. Boyish as he was and vain about his self-acquired philosophy, Consuelo had no misgivings as to his now expounding his theories of indifference to Uncle Stratford. She knew him already too well for that. The young man only laughed.

"It would not exactly be letting them go," he said cheerfully, "if they should prove never to have been mine."

Uncle Stratford was scandalized. He almost felt that such callousness in regard to twenty thousand acres of good Chalkshire property was an injustice to Consuelo. Poor girl! She would need all she could get if she married a man who "didn't care" whether nine thousand a year belonged to him or to his uncle: but it would be necessary in such circumstances to tie up all that might be left to her very securely on herself and her children. Uncle Stratford was quite fond of her children already: the Honourable Rupert Stratford

Hungerford, he was sure, would be a fine spirited lad, called after himself, with "Honourable" before it.

"Do tell me something I would really like to know," Basil begged, and he was evidently so much in earnest that Uncle Stratford really hoped to hear something practical at last.

"Any information in my power I shall give most willingly," he declared, settling himself more comfortably in his chair. "But it is right to tell your Lordship that I had no *intimacy* with the old Lord Winterslow and his successor . . ."

"It wasn't about them . . ." Basil interposed hastily, "but Donna Consuelo has told me — you needn't mind as you are not a lady — that you were born in 1739, when George II was king. You must surely remember Prior's Kitty — she lived in Amesbury."

Uncle Stratford sucked in his mouth, and glanced dubiously at Consuelo.

"Of course," he said in a severe tone, "I recollect Stephen Pryor of Winterbourne Ford; he owned a bit of property when his father died, but he sent it all to racket. The young woman may have lived at Amesbury, but . . . excuse me, my lord, Stephen's undesirable acquaintance. . . ."

"Oh, the Duchess of Queensbury was not what I call undesirable, only freakish."

"Her Grace! You're talking of her Grace! Certainly she lived at Amesbury; it belonged to her husband, in fact. Why, she died not so far back — she was at his present Majesty's coronation. I've *seen* her, I suppose, half a dozen times. But, of course, Pryor never knew her."

"I meant *Matt* Prior, the poet. . . . And Fielding — Henry Fielding — he lived in these parts. Do you remember him, too?"

“Why, yes. He lived in St. Anne’s St. and I’ve seen him scores of times. But he was a bad manager, and kept queer company: folks said he did it to put them in his story-books: but when a gentleman of birth frequents low society, depend upon it, he *likes* it. And what on earth good does it do filling books with riff-raff? With proper laws there should *be* no such wastrel, good for naught, drinking, swearing, tearing raskills. Meanwhile, least said of ’em soonest mended, say I.”

Uncle Stratford shook himself free of all connexion with such undesirable citizens — he did it mostly with his shoulders.

“It’s a wonderfully literary neighbourhood, though, this,” observed Basil, cheerfully unmoved. “There was the Judicious Hooker at Boscombe . . .”

Uncle Stratford let the Judicious Hooker pass, concluding that he was some scribbling angler: the river, he knew, was famous for trout, but he had always despised fishing.

“. . . and Addison born at Milston,” Basil ran on, “and George Herbert Parson at Bemerton.”

“I’ve heard of him,” Uncle Stratford admitted; “some connexion of Lord Tenby’s — a poor relation, I doubt. But before my time.”

Basil smiled with his usual undaunted cheerfulness, and said,

“Oh, yes! Long before. Then Burnett for your bishop. And now we have Mr. Hazlitt living at the Hut, and Elia staying with him.”

Uncle Stratford sucked in his mouth again.

“I never heard,” he declared austere, “of the gentleman *or* the lady.”

“Oh, but, Elia is not a lady. Elia is Charles Lamb. I like him better than Hazlitt. . . . They write essays. But Elia could write you an essay on the

poker and fill it with humanity. If Hazlitt were forced to write one on a baby he would make it as little human as a treatise about Mexican pyramids."

Uncle Stratford disliked billiards, and thought Mexican pyramids might be a new variant of that game. He looked at his own poker with a secret feeling that it would be like this Mr. Lamb's impertinence to write anything about it. But he was inclined to regard a taste for light literature as one of the follies or affectations of the leisured classes (for about forty years he had never done anything himself except grow calmly richer), and he did not like Lord Winterslow less for possessing the imperfections appropriate to his rank.

"For my part," he said, with a sort of humble condescension, "I have not had time in my laborious life for any but the *best* books."

"No one has," Basil agreed, with the same baffling cheerfulness of assent. "Do tell me, though, what you regard as the best books?"

"The two best books," said Uncle Stratford with a frown of decision, "are, I take it, Shakespeare and the Bible."

Consuelo noted with an inward smile the order of merit as given by Uncle Stratford. As a matter of fact, he had seen Hamlet acted at Chalkminster, and would readily have agreed with those critics who assume the entire madness of the Danish prince. He had not exactly *read* any work of Shakespeare's. But what pleased him more to recollect was that he had also seen Macbeth, and at Drury Lane.

"Those who have not witnessed," he declared, "the divine Siddons in the character of Lady Macbeth can hardly know what Shakespeare is."

"I'm afraid I shall *never* know," said Basil, "for she acts no more."

Uncle Stratford was rather glad of it. It gave him

a sense of superiority that he was not unwilling to clutch at. If this glib young fellow, with so many authors at his tongue's end, could see the great Sarah, too, there would have been nothing in it. He almost felt that he had snubbed him, and the sensation fortified his self-respect.

CHAPTER XX

As Christmas drew near Consuelo saw various preparations for the feast afoot. None of them were exactly of a religious character, and would have been as appropriate at Dace Court as at Summer Avon Manor. It was a new idea to the Sicilian-bred girl that the celebration of Christ's Birthday should be almost entirely a matter of eating and drinking. Apparently the chief point in everybody's mind was joviality. By Christmas Eve Aunt Priscilla even would mildly condone any unsteadiness of gait or thickness of speech discernible in the farm men on the score of Christmas coming but once a year.

"And really," Amelia would add, for Amelia was thoroughly good-natured, "they don't get too many chances of being jolly. *I don't blame 'em.*"

Consuelo thought of the dull and lack-joy faces she had seen at the meet that day, and did not want to blame them: only she could not perceive the jollity her aunts were excusing. When the dairyman staggered or the carter stuttered and mumbled they did not suggest hilarity.

For several days before Christmas Priscilla was almost wholly occupied in the kitchen or the larders. An immense amount of food seemed to be in preparation, though there was no mention of an influx of company. Christmas was evidently expected to bring with it Gargantuan appetites.

Then the house was to be decorated: which was done by thrusting tight little sprigs of holly along the joinings of the window sashes, where they could never have

gone had the windows fitted: and also by pushing larger sprays of evergreens behind the portraits of the deceased Dauntseys on the walls. In the course of these ceremonies Amelia swept a beautiful Dresden jug off the drawing-room mantelpiece, and it lay in the fender, smashed to what Miriam emphatically stated to be smithereens.

Consuelo, remembering the parallel mishap at Dace Court, wondered whether her aunt would slap herself. But she merely reminded the company again that Christmas comes but once a year, and that china, like pie-crusts, must be made to be broken.

“And the bits’ll make a crazy vawse: there’s plenty of putty in the workshop, and if I’ve time I’ll get it done soon enough to give the vawse to Jane Brown in a present; she’ll think the world of it. I’d like to give her a present, for she helps weeding, and don’t pull up the flowers with the weeds. I doubt it was partly your fault, Miriam: it’s impossible to have eyes under one’s chin, and I was reaching up to get that big garland over Lady Camilla’s portrait. If you’d held the jug steady it wouldn’t have happened.”

“So it wouldn’t,” agreed the politic Miriam, who did not in the least forget that Miss Mealy had bidden her be making another wreath and not just be standing staring while Miss Consuelo and herself were doing all the work.

Consuelo was mounted on a tall music-stool engaged in crowning with a wreath, as like those her aunt had made as possible, the portrait of her grandmother, who appeared to have been the last of the family held worthy to be thus handed down to posterity.

“Who *was* Lady Camilla?” she asked over her shoulder. “Well, she was one of the ancestors,” Amelia replied, not sorry to get away from the topic of the broken jug. “I think it was grandpapa’s great-

great-grandfather she married. I know it was in Charles II's time, and she was a Court Madam — the Earl of Cinqueports was her father. She'd the name of being a beauty, but some folks say she's like me: though Mama would never have it."

Amelia was down on the floor now, tying up another garland. Consuelo turned round and glanced from the portrait to her aunt.

"She *is* like you," she said. "Why wouldn't grand-mama have it?"

"Oh, she said it was just ridick'lous: me so thick and swarthy, you know, and Lady Camilla a beauty, and an Earl's daughter and that."

Consuelo did not understand the peculiar mental attitude of a mother who enjoyed snubbing her own daughter to increase the glory of an ancestress by marriage.

"I think *you* are 'ridick'lous,'" she declared, laughing. "You're not *thick* at all. And if *you're* swarthy, what must *I* be?"

"Oh! That's quite different. Your eyes are darker than mine, so's your hair: but your skin's fairer. No one could call you swarthy. Poor Mama! She'd be just proud of you if she were alive!"

Consuelo could not feel any keen desire of the survival or resurrection of old Mrs. Dauntsey, even for the sake of her critical approbation. She had an inward conviction that her grandmother must have been a tiresome person.

"You know," Amelia added, "your father was the only one of us dear Mama ever really cared for."

Consuelo hardly knew whether to be touched or exasperated by her aunt's ungrudging loyalty to the mother who had never cared much for her. Amelia alluded to Mrs. Dauntsey's indifference to three out of

four of her children as though it had been part of her general superiority.

"If I had seventeen children," Consuelo protested rhetorically, "I should like them all equally."

"It's hard to tell till you saw what they all turned out," the practical Amelia maintained with a shake of her head that was partly one of negation and partly intended to throw back a curl that got in her way. "And seventeen would be a monstrous large family. If all lived you'd find it difficult to start them in life, though some say a handle to their names makes all the difference with younger sons."

In detailing this conversation to her elder sister Amelia admitted that this final remark had "slipped out": but, luckily, she said Consuelo had not noticed it.

"In spite of grandmama," Consuelo observed, turning back to that lady's portrait, "you're really like Lady Camilla — I don't know that it's a compliment. She looks as hard as nails."

"Some say," Amelia began: then, with a thin veneer of diplomacy, she bade Miriam "step out into the near barn and see if there was any holly with more berries on."

Miriam, who divined a family mystery with hungry instinct, stepped out reluctantly.

"Well," Amelia went on, when the door was shut, "I didn't want to mention it before the girl. But some say this Lady Camilla was — you know, my dear, that the ladies of King Charles's court were not very — very domestic . . ."

Consuelo happened to know nothing about it. But she turned round once more and had another look at the fine lady in blue satin, cut undeniably low, and was ready to admit that domesticity was not indicated. It was not the gown, however, that influenced Consuelo's

decision, but an expression of chill selfishness in the Court beauty's fine eyes.

"Some say," Amelia continued, "that Squire Alured didn't get much comfort with his grand lady. She took him for his handsome face and good legs, I suppose; it's easy to see *he* was proud of them, too," and Amelia jerked her head in the direction of his portrait. "But down in the country he couldn't be always wearing things like those: and in leather breeches his legs might as well have been any shape. And I doubt my fine Madam soon found the Dauntseys weren't at the tip-top. Squire Alured had spent more in London than he'd any call, and Squire Athelstan, his father, had spent all *he* had in a better way, p'r'aps, fighting for the Martyr . . ."

"Who was the martyr?" Consuelo asked, with surprised visions of a Saint Lawrence on a gridiron, suggested by pictures in the Palazzo Reale at Palermo.

"Oh, King Charles the First. We'll have his service on 30th January: our folk were terribly loyal in those times. And, you see, all that had sent us downhill a lot, farms sold, to arm out men for the king's war, and land mortgaged and that. So Lady Camilla Dauntsey didn't find herself on the top of the tree down here in Chalkshire . . . very likely the big folks, the Tenbys and so on, forgot they'd known her in town. And she didn't like it . . . here's that girl back: I'll tell you another time."

But Miriam, who quite perceived that the story, whatever it might be, was not finished, had unwillingly to deliver a message from Miss Dauntsey. If Miss Mealy did not want her "particular" Miss Dauntsey would like her help up in the blue room where she was looking out the best tablecloths and napkins.

"Me want you: not at all, Miriam! One jug

broken's enough for this while. Go and help your mistress."

Amelia, who always made her sister do exactly as she chose, invariably spoke of her to the servants as the mistress.

"Well, now I can tell you," she continued, when Miriam was gone, "Lady Camilla, as I was saying, found herself of less account down here than she had expected. And she was one of those silly women who don't know how to settle down and be quiet when they've got a husband and children to take the place of routs and assemblies. So her husband began to find she'd a temper; and, as he had one of his own, they hadn't much peace. He was not bad-natured, though, and to please her, asked some of her fine folk to stay here: and no doubt they only turned up their noses at the place and the country servants and that. Anyway, they didn't stop long, and when they went away, Lady Camilla said she had promised to go with them, to return the visit. The Squire let her go, and, I daresay, didn't look very sorry when he was saying good-bye: so, instead of coming back in a month or two, she never came back at all — at least, not for years: and her husband soon gave up asking her to come. If she liked London better than home he would not be begging her to return to her children and him. I daresay he wrote pretty sharp, for we've all got tempers even now: at all events, my lady took offence, and left off writing excuses for staying on in London with her brother, who was a bachelor. She gave over writing at all, and perhaps Squire Athelstan gave over thinking about her. But now and then he had to think of her, for her name got talked about, and the reports crept down here — goodness knows how. You see *he* had been about Court, too, and maybe some kind friend of his took the trouble to write. I don't know, I'm sure,

how that was. And like enough there was no truth in the gossip — there isn't much, as a rule. Not that *she* had good rights to complain: when a woman chooses to live for years away from her husband, and never goes near him or her children, she must reckon to be talked about: and Lord Cinqueports, her brother, was a wild fellow, not at all fit to look after her. King Charles was dead, and King James on the throne: then King William came over, and King James went over the water, and Lord Cinqueports followed him: for, racketty as he was, he was loyal, and I daresay his debts and that made him all the more willing to be off to France. But he wouldn't take his sister, though they say she wanted him to. And she had nowhere else to live in London when her brother was gone. He slipped off, too — whether on account of the debts or for some political reasons I don't know; and Lady Camilla found herself in a quandary. So she made up her mind to come home here, and she never wrote to say she was coming lest her husband should tell her to keep away. It was a pity, for he was a good-hearted man, and I don't doubt he would have been sorry for her in spite of all she'd done and left undone. All the same, he wasn't improved. Up in town, in his gay days, he'd been as racketty as the rest, and when he was left alone here, he took to his bottle and such company as he could get. I often think of the poor children, with no mother to teach them any good, and a father whose example could only teach them bad. Well, one wild night, at this very time of the year, when the snow lay deep, and more was falling, Lady Camilla came back. There was some sort of coach even then, and it passed through the village, not like now. And she came in it, for cheapness p'r'aps, and it dropped her and her traps outside the door, and went on to Chalkminster. It was late, and all were abed except

the Squire, and he was alone with his bottle in the little parlour behind the dining-room. I'm sure I don't know if there were knockers in those times: perhaps poor Lady Camilla had to knock on the door with her hands: and if that was so she would not make anyone hear — even if they were sober: for the little room's too far out of earshot, and the servants all slept right away at the back. Being Christmas Eve I daresay they had gone to bed a bit jolly — when the master sets the lead the servants will follow. At last Lady Camilla gave up trying the front door, and went round to the back. It was all black, not a light showing: for the little room has shutters, you know, and they would be fast closed. Inside, the Squire was asleep: not just with the common sleep of a hearty man who's been out all day, and *that's* heavy enough — look how Athelstan sleeps — you've seen him in his chair of an evening. But that other Squire Athelstan was dead asleep with the sleep of drink: and let Lady Camilla knock at the window as she would, he never heard. That's what I honestly believe; and it's bad enough: but not bad enough for them that like to make a story."

Amelia all this time had been making wreaths, sitting on the floor. She paused now, and laid the half finished garland in her lap, not without a half apprehensive glance at the picture over the fireplace. It was daylight still, but the dull daylight of a late December afternoon, and, Consuelo thought, more dismal than if it had been darker when the fire would have had more chance. The fire itself, however, had been neglected, and was not blazing cheerfully.

"Some pretend," Amelia went on, "that Athelstan did awake at last, and opened the shutter to look out. That he saw a figure outside and took it for a ghost: and shut the shutter again in a fright. It's a long while ago, and there's been plenty of time for the story

to grow worse . . . I never believe he awoke till morning: but when morning came, and it was Christmas Day, he woke sure enough and so did the others, and Lady Camilla was found dead in the snow, with her hands against the glass of the window, as if she had died knocking at it to be let in."

As Amelia reached the climax of her doleful story the fire fell in with a crash that made both aunt and niece start, but it blazed up, and the room was full of firelight, that blinked in the polished panels, and brought out the portraits on the walls from the dusk in which they had been gradually obscured.

Consuelo and Amelia both looked up at the portrait of Lady Camilla, and the latter shook her head.

"It's a horrid story," she said, "and what I've told you isn't the end of it. Do you believe in ghosts?"

Consuelo did not know, and said so.

"Nor I. At least, I don't see much sense in them. Still, you do hear of queer things. And many have declared they saw Lady Camilla — after she was dead, I mean — not only soon after, but even during pretty recent years. There are accounts of it in the Gentleman's Magazine — two or three, and the last was written by a gentleman that slept in the blue-room — he was here on a Christmas visit — the winter before Papa died."

"Is it in the blue-room the ghost is seen?"

Amelia nodded, and Consuelo suspected that the fact accounted for Aunt Priscilla's desire of Miriam's company while looking out the best linen.

"You know," said Amelia, "there's a fine old bed there: carved mahogany with satin curtains. They say it was Lady Camilla's, and had been here long before her time. I've heard say that King Charles slept in it after Worcester fight — on his escape to the sea, before he got the crown back. Well, the gentleman

who wrote the last account in the Gentleman's Magazine says that he went to bed very comfortable with not a thought of ghosts: of course no one would have told him that there was one in his room. There was a good fire, and plenty of light when he fell asleep: he woke up very cold, and there stood a tall lady in blue satin, with snow on her shoulders and snow on her hair, holding back the bed-curtains, and staring at him, even so piteous, shivering and shivering, but not saying a word . . . the tears were running down her face, and one fell on his hand: when he felt it fall he cried out, and no wonder, and the lady bent her head and turned away, as if she was broken-hearted. She stood a minute by the fire, looking down into it, and the snow on her hair and on her shoulders began to melt, so that the drops fell down on the fender: then she was gone. He'd cried out so loud that someone came to his room, and both he and they saw the splashes of wet on the steel fender . . . isn't it a strange tale?"

CHAPTER XXI

It was a strange tale, and not the least strange thing about it Consuelo thought was her aunt's way of telling it.

It would never have occurred to her before that Amelia was imaginative; in fact, she perceived even now that in the repeating of this bit of family legend nothing had been added out of Amelia's own head; it had been a simple report of what she had heard. Nevertheless, it was easy to see that the tale had a grim fascination for the practical-seeming aunt.

"Why *should* she come back to show herself like that?" she asked. "That's if it's true at all."

Consuelo pondered and shook her head.

"You don't believe she ever does show herself?"

"I don't know," Consuelo answered plainly. "I don't see why those gentlemen who wrote accounts of it should have invented it. Only I don't think I should ever *believe* it, really believe it, unless I saw it myself."

"Don't say that!" her aunt begged her, with a nervous glance at Lady Camilla. "If it *is* true, she might show herself to you just to *make* you believe."

Consuelo was still pondering the subject, and Amelia could see that some theory about it was stirring itself in her mind.

"Tell me what your idea is," she begged quite earnestly. "I see you've got one."

"Not exactly. But if such a tale *were* true, I think a Catholic might say that the poor woman's image was allowed to show itself to those on earth in order to

awake pity and remembrance, so that prayers might be said for her."

Amelia knew very little about Catholics, but of course she had heard of Purgatory: Consuelo's theory apparently was that the soul of Lady Camilla was there, and that prayers might be of use to it. She was slightly taken aback — it seemed to her, in a way, rather a liberty to be putting into such a purely Romish institution the soul of a member of her own family, who had, after all, been a Protestant.

"But," Amelia objected, "Lady Camilla was not a Catholic."

"No. But she might need a good deal of purgatory all the same. According to the story she certainly did."

While Amelia was trying to grasp the Catholic point of view sufficiently to understand Consuelo's suggested theory, a knock was heard at the front door, and three minutes later Mr. Hungerford was announced.

"I have been all alone for three days," he explained, "and my own company had ceased to be improving. So I made up my mind to ride over here. Am I too late a visitor?"

Amelia strongly repudiated the idea, and went off "to tell Priscilla," in reality, to tidy up, and get rid of the big apron in which she had been working.

"Lady Tenby," Basil informed Consuelo when they were alone, "sent Bemerton over three or four days ago to ask me to spend Christmas with them, but I got out of it."

"My uncle and aunt had wondered if you would care to come here," Consuelo told him.

"And what made them relinquish so hospitable a desire?" he asked with a sort of quick annoyance.

"It was my fault. I couldn't quite see what Christmas had to do with you: and I didn't encourage them. That was on Monday at breakfast. Lord

Bemerton called here on his way home after seeing you. . . .”

“It’s not exactly on his way home.”

“That made it all the more polite of him to come. Anyway, he came, and told us you had refused his mother’s invitation: and my aunts were sure then that you would not have come here.”

Basil laughed, his queer frank laugh — like a boy caught scheming.

“And I only said No to Lady Tenby because I hoped to be asked here!” he confessed.

Consuelo could not help laughing too, he looked so much disappointed and crestfallen.

“Is it too late?” he asked eagerly. “Won’t you be nice and tell your aunts? Perhaps they will ask me after all.”

“You had better tell them yourself.”

And it was easy to see that he meant to do so.

“I’m glad you are come,” he said as soon as the aunts appeared. “I’m not on speaking terms with Donna Consuelo.”

“I won’t be called Donna Consuelo. I’m an English young person — Aunt Amelia says so.”

“Is that what you were quarrelling about?” Amelia enquired complacently. Quarrels were very intimate.

“We have not been quarrelling. But Mr. Hungerford refused a kind invitation, and now he’s cross with me, because he didn’t get another.”

Amelia began to smell a rat.

“And it was your fault he didn’t,” she declared, going over to his side promptly.

“Yes. I didn’t know she was so ill-natured. She was ready to eat turkeys and mince-pies herself, untroubled by the lonely picture of me all by myself at home,” Basil complained.

"I didn't know you cared for turkey: and there's chopped beef in mince-pies. For all I knew you might have a large party at home to royster on lettuce and stewed turnip-tops."

"The lettuces are very poor at this time of year," Aunt Priscilla observed compassionately, not half understanding all that was going on.

"Turkey or no turkey, you and your sister meant to ask me if Donna Consuelo had not interfered. Won't you ask me all the same?"

The aunts were very willing to proclaim the invitation that had been reserved *in petto* in spite of a little hospitable trepidation on Priscilla's part — how to get the blue-room aired in time, was really the only consideration that gave her pause. The best linen was all out, the India china dinner service had been got ready (in Consuelo's honour: it hadn't been used since Mrs. Dauntsey died, even at Christmas: the "second-best" Chelsea set had been good enough when the Squire and his sisters were alone).

"Did you see Miriam?" Amelia, the ready-witted, asked her sister. "Wasn't she wanting you?"

"Not that I knew," Priscilla meekly replied, but Amelia coughed so alarmingly that even Priscilla understood at last.

"And how are you to get any clothes?" Consuelo asked their guest, with irritating simplicity. "Or do you go to bed in riding-dress?"

Basil made a face.

"I can send William back for them," he declared readily.

"So you've a groom with you! I never knew you rode about the country with one, like a young lady . . . Aunt Amelia, he *meant* to be asked. He brought the man over *on purpose* to go back and get

his things. And you and Aunt Priscilla have walked into his trap."

"Well, we don't mind the trap."

Amelia, and, for that matter, Basil, too, could easily see that Consuelo was glad he was to stay. There was a ring in her voice, and an animation about her whole manner that made her seem like a happy child. The truth was that the prospect of having someone *young* added to their party delighted her. All the preparations of so much extra food, all the ceremony of decking the house simply for themselves had seemed to her almost dismal. And she really had thought often of Basil alone in his empty home. She liked him, without troubling to ask herself why, and above all, he was young. The presence of just the one guest would make all the difference, even though he took none of the turkey and mince-pies.

"We shall be six at dinner to-morrow," Amelia observed, "and a gentleman for each lady. Uncle Stratford says he's coming."

This was after Basil had been out to the stables to see William, and after Amelia herself had been away to see if she could help Priscilla in any way.

"I'll take Uncle Stratford in to dinner," Consuelo declared. "And you shall have Mr. Hungerford. . . . Why, there's another knock at the door! Someone else come to ask to be invited to stay with us!"

"No such thing," Basil protested.

"Who can it *be* at this time of night?" Amelia wondered.

"You see you *were* a late visitor," Consuelo told their guest maliciously.

Miriam opened the drawing-room door, and announced "Lady Caradoc."

"I am come," said the new visitor, "on an indiscreet errand."

Then she shook hands with the two ladies, and the gentleman was introduced to her.

"Yes! I'm afraid you'll say I am very indiscreet," Lady Caradoc went on, but with the air of one who didn't mind it. "Your brother met me in the village yesterday and was so good to ask me to dine with you all to-morrow. I should have liked to say Yes at once, and to ask if I might bring my son, who came home from Cambridge last night. But we were promised to Lord and Lady Wilbury: indeed, you know, I always dine there on Christmas Day. So I had to say No when I wanted to say Yes, like my cousin Cynthia when the Duke of Ulster proposed to her two days after she'd accepted Sir Timothy Rackrent. . . ."

"Did the Duke know?" Amelia enquired with simplicity.

"Can't say," replied Lady Camilla, laughing loudly. "If he did he didn't let on. He only said, 'A pleasure deferred,' and he was right, for Sir Timothy drank himself to death next year, and Cynthia married the Duke. But the *point* is that Lady Wilbury has just sent a groom over to tell me Newton Tony, the second son, has developed smallpox, and do I mind? Of course I don't mind if he doesn't: but I couldn't take Theodore into the jaws of smallpox, could I? And I've given the servants leave to go home for the day — it saves having a Christmas dinner for them — and so I just stepped round to see if you'd let us come to you. I'm not infectious: for the groom knew what was in her ladyship's note, and I made Blowhard open it — that's my maid: her hereditary name isn't Blowhard, but she does it. And it wasn't

selfish, for there aren't more pits in all Wales than she has on her face, having had it. And may we come? Theodore would love it: he . . ."

"Of course," cried the hospitable Amelia. "And now we shall be eight at dinner, and Priscilla needn't go in with Athelstan."

"Eight?" inquired Lady Caradoc, with calculation in her eye.

"Yes: for Uncle Stratford is coming, and Mr. Hungerford is staying here."

"I'll take in Mr. Stratford," her ladyship declared promptly.

"No, you can't," said Consuelo, "for he's engaged to me."

"Engaged couples don't go in together. . . . But isn't he your great-grandfather?" asked Lady Caradoc.

"Only my grandmother's uncle: and he *is* going in to dinner with me."

"Can't you oblige Lady Caradoc?" Basil suggested.

"Of course she can. And Theodore shall take *her* in," said her ladyship, who could see through any number of brick walls.

"Perhaps Miss Dauntsey will settle all that," said Basil demurely.

"Miss Dauntsey? Oh, you mean Priscilla. *She* never settles anything. She'll be ever so obliged if we get it all fixed ourselves. *You'll* have to take *her* in, Lord Winterslow: she's hostess, and you're biggest Bob. For you *are* Lord Winterslow, whatever you may call yourself. *I* know all about you. My dear young lady, don't let him impose on you with his romance and nonsense; he's Lord Winterslow, and has no more right to be masquerading in his uncle's name than he has to call himself the Queen of Sheba. And

I must take the Squire in, for I'm My ladyship, and he'll be host — I daresay you've a dozen titles, but foreign ones don't count here, you know. Our pretty English way is to carry our own titles abroad with us, and expect to have them recognized, but to take no notice of foreign ones that land on our hospitable shores. Did you say you had a title?"

"I don't remember," said Consuelo, with unabashed mendacity.

"Because I know your mother was a princess — Hetty Tenby told me so: and in Sicily where there's one title there are generally a dozen, and some in the female line. But your Aunt Mealy shall take Uncle Stratford to dinner, and you and Theodore are the balance. So you'll *have* to go in with him. It would never do for your aunt and him to be paired for the whole evening. She'd be talking gardening and plants, and he knows more about it than she does, and that would make her savage. He's what they call a Scientific Botanist, and has all sorts of theories. It seems that plants are ladies and gentlemen, just like one's self: so that when we buy shrubs we shall have to insist there shall be no followers. And so it's settled, and we may come, and Theodore and *you* are to go in to dinner together."

Lady Caradoc had addressed most of her long speech to Consuelo, who listened with an elaborate and rather exasperating attention. Her ladyship had a large broad-shouldered manner that was rather adapted to the amplitude of her build than to the general usages of contemporary society. Consuelo, so far, was more entertained than attracted by it. Such a manner might mean anything between impertinence and irresponsible cheerfulness and good-nature.

"Well, all being settled," Lady Caradoc concluded, shaking herself up out of her seat much as if she

had been an unwieldy sort of dog, "I'm off, as the handle said to the jug: and time, too, if any of us are to dress for dinner. Good-night, Aunt Mealy: good-night, Lord Winterslow: (no Mr. Hungerford here, please, for I won't have it. I know your uncle, and if *you* knew him as well as I do, you'd never have taken the least notice of his cantankerousness — he'd claim the nose off your face if he saw it: his own is like an asparagus-top: and if I'd been your mother, I'd have risen from my grave and come all the way from India in my ghost to let you know what I thought of it). Good-night — what on earth am I to call you? Miss Consuelo I *won't* call you: and Miss Dauntsey I can't call you: and you say you've no title of your own: it's a pity; under the circumstances, 'twould be a convenience. What do *you* call her, Lord Winterslow?"

Basil apparently refused to admit that he called her anything. But Aunt Mealy chipped in.

"He calls her Donna Consuelo — like she was called at Sicily."

"Hm. That's something, anyway. Shall I call you ditto?"

"Why Ditto? It isn't very pretty," Consuelo answered with the politest possible air of indifference as to whatever mode of address for herself Lady Caradoc might be pleased to adopt.

"On a high horse, eh!" cried her ladyship, with a laugh that set the lustres jingling on the chimney-piece. "We'll get over that! My dear child, it's no use taking me seriously. My husband tried it, and it killed him. Theodore tries it, and it makes him a prig. Don't you be a prig-ess: you're not meant for it. Good-night, anyway: and make up your mind before we meet again that nothing will make me pretty-behaved: if I could have been, Theodore's grandpapa

would not have left me as poor as I am. I say what I like, and as it's all I've got, I'll stick to it: and *you*'ve nothing to leave me, if I repented in sackcloth and what's their names. Never mind ringing, Aunt Mealy, Lord Winterslow'll open the door for me. . . ."

When she was really gone, Consuelo could hardly believe it.

"I thought," she told her aunt, "she was going to stay on till it was to-morrow night and make one trip of it."

CHAPTER XXII

CONSUELO went in to dinner on Christmas Day with Uncle Stratford in spite of Lady Caradoc. But eight is a tiresome number, and her ladyship flatly refused to have either her son or another lady next her. So she got her own way in all but the name of it, as she loudly boasted. She sat on the Squire's right hand, with Uncle Stratford on hers, and "Lord Winterslow" came next, with Priscilla on his right at the head of the table. Amelia had the next corner place, and Theodore was between her and Consuelo.

"I was quite determined to have you next me, Mr. Stratford," Lady Caradoc loudly informed that gentleman the moment Squire Dauntsey had scrambled over grace as though it were a five-bar gate with furze on the top.

Uncle Stratford made use of his best smile, with all his expensive teeth in it, and bowed sideways with wonderful agility for his time of life. All the same, he began to be upon his guard: such outspoken amiability from an attractive widow was far from disagreeable, but called for caution. Having been prudent for ninety years he wasn't going to give over now.

"They tell me," her ladyship went on with a shake of herself that made all her bracelets rattle, "that you are a Republican, and hate lords. . . ."

Uncle Stratford jumped in his seat, and darted a look of protest over his right shoulder in the direction of Basil, who was making himself agreeable to Priscilla, and neither heard nor heeded Lady Caradoc.

". . . but that," she continued, "must not prej-

udice you against me: for my husband was not a lord, though he would have liked to be. He was merely a knight, and Groom of the Candlestick to the poor king: it was only four hundred a year, but the perquisites used to be considerable. The Groom of the Candlestick had all the candle-ends till her present majesty, careful soul, determined they should be used up by the young princes — a moral and economical woman, you know: her reform was intended to make their royal highnesses go to bed quicker . . . aren't you having any soup? It's giblet, and far better than turtle, in my opinion."

But Uncle Stratford was grown shy of soup in public. When he had it at home, he called it broth, and drank it out of a large breakfast-cup, with a sort of bib round his neck.

"Not any, I thank your ladyship. . . . And you give me to understand the perquisites were valuable before Her Majesty, Queen Charlotte, diverted them?"

Lady Caradoc held up her plump hands, and conveyed the idea of almost incalculable profits.

"There must have been terrible waste," Uncle Stratford observed with a pursed lip: but he was human, if high-principled, and he could feel for the sufferer. "All the same," he added, "there should have been compensation when the emolument ceased: there was undoubtedly a vested interest."

"Ah! Republican or no, you have a feeling heart," cried her ladyship, laying one of her pretty hands on Uncle Stratford's and squeezing it. The old gentleman trembled and blushed as red as a turkey-cock: he clutched his piece of bread under her ladyship's caress as though it were his sheet anchor.

Lady Caradoc felt the tremble and saw the flush, and winked delightedly at Consuelo across the table. Her

son beheld the wink *en route*, and observed to its recipient that his mother was enjoying herself.

"I should think she always does," Consuelo remarked.

"It's not very easy to stop her," Mr. Caradoc agreed. "There's nothing like knowing what you want. Once you do, you mostly get it."

Consuelo pondered this, and said,

"I don't know what *I* want: I seem to want nothing."

"Then you'll get it," Theodore declared with conviction.

He was not a bit like his mother, except in being tall and large: his face was much handsomer than hers, though no one who liked her would have called Lady Caradoc plain. His features were perhaps too regular, whereas her ladyship had not a set of features at all, but only a nose, mouth and eyes of different and inconsistent types, assembled together above a very decisive chin, with nothing to connect them beyond a general air of comfortable good-nature. The only point in common between Mr. Caradoc and his mother was the strong, insistent chin, which corresponded in both to the decided way in which the most trivial statement was made.

"Napoleon, for instance," Theodore continued, as if there could be no doubt of what he said, "got what he wanted, merely because he knew exactly what it was."

"It wasn't genius?" Consuelo asked, with a delusive mildness of suggestion.

"Genius is the last thing that generally makes up its mind. . . ."

"And you: do you make up your mind, or are you a genius?"

It was rather unfair in Consuelo to remember so

well that Lady Caradoc had called her son a prig, when she had been at so little pains to treasure up any other of that lady's candid utterances.

"Oh! I didn't know we were talking about ourselves," Mr. Caradoc answered with some presence of mind. "I thought it was Napoleon."

"You said I should never get anything. I am not Napoleon."

Theodore laughed.

"And I implied that you might be if only you cared about it."

"What are you and Theodore fighting about?" Lady Caradoc called out across the table. "When folks quarrel they ought to do it out loud, so the company may take sides."

"I promise to scream my share of it when we begin quarrelling," Consuelo answered with the urbanity that irritated Lady Caradoc. "But Mr. Caradoc was only paying me an extravagant compliment."

"All the same," her ladyship assured Uncle Stratford in a penetrating aside, "she was sitting on Theodore, and he's not used to it. Wholesome but unpleasant like senna-tea."

Basil had looked up when Lady Caradoc had demanded what Consuelo and her son were fighting about. He did not welcome the suggestion: if anyone were to quarrel with the young man he felt equal to the business himself.

Oh! the Red Mist!

He was much less dissatisfied when Consuelo disclaimed the quarrelling and asserted that Mr. Caradoc had been complimenting her. Young ladies do not mention across a dinner-table the compliments they have been receiving when they care about them.

"I'm afraid," murmured Priscilla, who had seen the

expression of her neighbour's face as he looked up, "you don't find it very tender."

Perhaps tender was not quite the right word for stewed celery-tops, but Priscilla had been thinking of the turkey.

"Oh, very tender indeed," protested Basil: and Lady Caradoc heard him across Uncle Stratford, and wondered what on earth the man was maundering about. But Uncle Stratford was really enjoying his turkey, and she was too good-natured to interfere with him.

"Very good turkey this," she observed to the Squire instead. "Is it the one that used to run after me and use horrible language? I hope so. Bad examples should always be discouraged, and *you* might pick it up, you know."

"*I* never ran after you," protested Uncle Athelstan with his mouth full.

"I shouldn't mind if you did, so long as you weren't swearing like the turkey-cock. I'm used to being run after: or I was once. They only swore when I said Not if I knew it. Sir Theodore wasn't my only chance by a many. I was never a quarter so pretty as your niece, but I had a more terrestrial manner."

Uncle Athelstan had not the remotest notion what a terrestrial manner might be. He thought of a globe there used to be in the Head Master's study at school, and said,

"Come! You're not so stout as that, my lady. Only comfortable: and Consuelo will fill out before she's your age."

"I saw you at church this morning," Mr. Caradoc was telling Consuelo.

"And I saw you: indeed, I couldn't help it very well, as we went in at the same time."

"Yes. But I'm not a Roman Catholic."

"Oh, aren't you?" Consuelo replied, as if she could

not know anything about it. "Is it harder to see people when they are Roman Catholics?"

She did not care about leading questions or remarks, and did not see what her creed had to do with him.

Mr. Caradoc laughed, but, all the same, he began to think his mother had been right as usual when she had told him that Consuelo was rather "offish" in her manner, though there couldn't be two words about her looks.

"And she's very distinguished, my dear, as well as handsome. No mistaking her good blood. But I fancy she misses the sort of society she's been brought up to, and doesn't mind showing it."

So Lady Caradoc had informed her son, and in this she was mistaken. Consuelo was quite content with her present society — even without the addition to it of her ladyship.

"You have lived always at Palermo, have you not?" Theodore asked. "And at a very interesting time: all Europe, especially England, was thinking about Palermo ten years ago."

"I was only ten years old then," Consuelo reminded him, with a smile, "but I was old enough to know that a great deal was going on. I remember the Queen going away, and I remember the wedding of the Duchess of Orleans. I had to give her a bouquet. Before that she used often to come to the Convent where I was at school, and she was very gracious — but till she became engaged she used to look sad."

"I wonder they let her marry that horrible man."

"Is he horrible? I know his father was Egalité, but he himself is full of sorrow and shame for his father's crimes."

"If he told you so you should not have believed him."

"Young men do not express their contrition for ancestral faults to little girls," laughed Consuelo, "and he only spoke to me twice. Once was to ask me if I liked *marrons-glacés*, and the other was to tell me that he had been in England. I shall disappoint you if you expect to learn the inner mind of the royal family of Sicily from me."

"Who was most popular, the king or the queen? That is not a state secret."

"Oh, the king. Unhappy people are never popular. Maria Carolina hated being in exile at Palermo, especially as the English did what they liked — I mean your Government. Ferdinand didn't mind a bit: Sicily or Naples was all one to him so long as he had his dogs, and could shoot all day long. At Naples the queen managed him, and at Palermo it was Lord William Bentinck: perhaps he didn't find much difference."

"I admire Maria Carolina: 'twas a pity Louis XVI didn't marry her instead of her sister. Perhaps there would have been no French Revolution."

"You mean it would have started at Naples instead."

"Ah! But Ferdinand need not have married Marie Antoinette."

Mr. Caradoc liked talking of affairs of state, concerning which he had always definite opinions.

"Napoleon is said to be ill," he informed his neighbour. "He pretends that the climate of St. Helena disagrees with him."

"Sir Hudson Low would infect any climate."

"Oh, come! He has to do his duty."

"When people have to do their duty, it is disagreeable to be the field of their operations. Do you think St. Helena would suit *your* health, Mr. Caradoc?"

"In St. Helena there would be no career for me," Theodore explained: British Parliamentary life being

his object. Consuelo suggested that Napoleon also might find the island unsuited to *his* career.

“But *his* is finished.”

“If he told you so,” Consuelo observed, “you should not have believed him.”

They both laughed, and Mr. Caradoc assured his neighbour that the Napoleonic episode was completed. He evidently knew all about it.

“Bonaparte was the European rubbish-cart,” he informed her. “Having done his work, he has to disappear. The future is the thing and Napoleon has nothing now to do with it. A man of genius is wanted once in every thousand years: a thousand years ago it was Charlemagne. For the next nine hundred and ninety-nine years men of common sense will serve the world’s turn.”

“But you can hardly expect to live for nine hundred and ninety-nine years,” Consuelo reminded him.

CHAPTER XXIII

WHEN dinner was over the ladies and the two young men were not separated, for word came that the Mummers were arrived, and they went out to the near barn to see their performance. The Squire and Uncle Stratford staying behind.

About a dozen young men were the actors, and some of their costumes would have entirely puzzled Consuelo but for Mr. Caradoc who was extremely fond of explaining things.

There were three shepherds whose dress was so very unlike that of the shepherds on the plain that its wearers concluded it must be like that of the Holy Land: they each wore a sheepskin by way of mantle, and a horned ram's head for cap, with trunk hose, and sandals in place of boots and breeches. The wearer of the red trunks carried a gilt star on the end of a black wand, and all three broke into a carol.

“ ’Twas on Christmas night,
When snow lay white,
As Jesus came to heal our plight.

“ The Bedlam folks was gone to bed,
‘ No room for you,’ they rudely said,
‘ Go to the inn for fire and bread.’

“ The inns was full; the night were cold:
Mary she wep, but would na scold.
Outside the get they found a fold:

“The Lord was born amids the sheep,
While we poor shippets watch did keep
And kings and lords was fast asleep. . . .

“The angels bade we go and see
The King of Heavenly Majesty,
In manger laid so cauld and wee.”

There were at least a score of these verses, and when they had sung them, the three shepherds yielded the stage to three negroes, with European hands, tinsel crowns, and scarlet cloaks bordered with weasel skins, the tails left on. Even before they sang their carol Consuelo knew them, of course, for Melchior, Caspar and Balthasar.

But the rest of the show had nothing to do with the Nativity.

The carols over, a much more secular sort of performance followed. All the characters crowded the stage together, and engaged in an uncouth dance, during which it seemed the principal object of all the rest to flout and buffet one Colonel Noneshill, who was so obliging as to carry his name and title on a cardboard label round his neck. His dress was scarcely military, for he had a squashy kind of scarlet cap with four horns or high corners to it, and he wore a scarlet cape, over a kind of petticoat with many buttons, of the same colour.

“Colonel Noneshill means Cardinal Numskull,” Mr. Caradoc informed Consuelo. “The mumming is older than Christianity, and is perhaps a relic of the Roman rule in Britain: a ghost of the Roman Saturnalia, in fact, when slaves might mock at their lords. Then Christianity came, and the Church tried in vain to put down the heathen merry-making: all it got for its pains was that the people, instead of making sport of their secular masters, made game of Church dig-

nitaries. What do you make of the fat fellow, stuffed with pillows or hay, and the red nose?"

"That's for you, Lord Bad 'Abits," one of the performers shouted at that moment, tweaking the scarlet nose of the portly masquerader in the loose black gown.

Consuelo could not guess, and Theodore assured her that Lord Bad Habits stood for My Lord Bad Abbot.

"What makes it all the more quaint and interesting," Mr. Caradoc considered, "is that none of them have the least idea what it means. It is simply an illustration of the force of survival."

Presently from behind a curtain of rough sacking a lad, on all fours, covered with an ass's skin, ambled onto the rude stage, and Colonel Noneshill and Lord Bad 'Abits had a violent struggle as to which of them should mount the high-spirited steed, whose gambols and hee-haws particularly delighted the audience. Colonel Noneshill produced a sword from under his cape, and ran it through the fattest part of My Lord's black habit, and through the aperture a string of black-puddings fell out. Then the wounded dignitary expired into the arms of one of the dusky sages from the East, who kissed his dying lips tenderly, and left a sooty imprint on the Abbot's cheek.

Colonel Noneshill had now a fair field (and certainly no favour) and ultimately succeeded in mounting the ass, who immediately, like Balaam's, broke into speech.

"Christmiss," brayed the ass, "comes but once a year,
And brings kind 'arts and gen'rous cheer,
Wines for the rich, for huz good beer,
And so good luck to all that's here.

Hee-haw, see-saw,
The mistletoe baugh,
Warm 'arts can meet the wintry snaw,
Hee-haw!"

With the last word of his song the ass reared prodigiously, and Colonel Noneshill was unseated, whereupon the rest fell upon him and slapped and hustled him, in proof of the goodness of their hearts, while the ass clambered down from the stage and began to go round the company with a bag in his mouth to collect their largesse.

The barn was full of village folk, and among them stood Hurdcott watching Consuelo, where she sat between Basil and Theodore, with much more attention than he gave to the performance, very stale to him, of the Christmas mummers. It was the first year since he was old enough that he had refused to bear his share in it.

In all his life he had never passed so lonely a Christmas. He had only come to see the show to-night because he knew she would be there: and she was not even aware of his presence.

Even when she went out, leaning on Mr. Caradoc's arm, and passing almost close to him, she did not see him, for he shrank back from her, into the dim obscurity of the ill-lighted barn. He longed so terribly to meet her eyes with his, to see in them the old friendliness of recognition that he did not dare to risk a disappointment: she might see him and just pass on without noticing. That he could not bear, so he drew away into the shadow, and she went out quite close to him without the least suspicion that he was within two yards of her.

"Come wi' us and be a bit friendly," a young lad he had been friendly with till lately said in his ear when the gentry were gone out, and the village folks had crowded after them. "You don't truly deserve it, for you wouldna jine in the foon. Neerthelass, you've bin jolly, times gone, and come and be jolly wi' us agin. They'll all be glad to share wi' ee."

Poor Hurdcott! It was a temptation. To you and me it would not have been: but to him, who had been lonely and sad all Christmas Day, it was. The tap-room of the Dauntsey Arms, crowded with the Mummers and their admiring friends, thick with tobacco reek and the smell of burnt beer, presented to Hurdcott a cheerful contrast with his cold garret under the thatch at Widow Brown's where he lodged. It seemed to him a long while since he had laughed; nothing in the mumming had won a smile from him; indeed, he had had no eyes for it: all his attention had been given to Consuelo as she sat and listened to Mr. Caradoc's explanations. He, too, was young, and, just as Consuelo could not help missing the friends of her own age, so he, too, felt the want of young voices in his ears.

"Thee'll niver be for gawin' t' bed fore ten o'clock o' Christmiss night!" expostulated his former friend, Lijah Rowden, the carter's son, generally known as young Rowdy to avoid confusion — which left it open whether Lijah senior were rowdy or no.

"Nay, lad, I'm not for bed," Hurdcott answered, making up his mind, "you'll be abed before *me*. You know Jan Cowmeadow, the shepherd's sick, and young Jan's doing his job for him. He's not had any Christmas yet, and I'll be getting on now and take his place — so he'll be able to come down to the Arms and have his fun with you all. He'll be with you in ten minutes, for the fold's just behind the Arch'ry close . . ."

Young Rowdy thought it was an arranged thing, and did not want to spoil Jan's chance of "a bit of Christmas," especially as Jan had lately been much better company than Hurdcott. So he said no more, but turned away to joke with a young person called Mira Billett, "who never could abear to see two lads cracking together when lasses was so plenty: 'twas just waste like, and silliness."

Hurdcott made his way out of the barn, and turned up Squire's Close to the wooden gates leading into the long, narrow Archery Close where he got into the path leading up to 'Togbury Rings: five minutes' walking brought him to the stubble that was really a bit of the down, first ploughed in the time of the great wars so lately ended.

Here he found Jan Cowmeadow watching by the woolly fold as, three or four and twenty years ago, Hurdcott's foster-father had been watching by his on the hump of down between Foley Bottom and Avonsbury on the Christmas Eve, which had been to all practical purposes Hurdcott's first birthday. It does not take long to make a man understand what he is glad to hear, and Jan soon took in that, after all, he was to have his "bit of Christmiss." Hurdcott had learned more of shepherding from Cormack than Jan had ever learned from his father, so there could be no objection to the delegation of duty, and Jan did not waste much time over polite scruples. If Hurdcott liked to be "mumpsy" it wasn't his fault. So he went off whistling what he confidently supposed to be a tune, and Hurdcott was left alone.

Now he was by himself he felt less lonely: in the crowd of the barn, when Consuelo had been but a yard or two away, she had seemed immeasurably removed from him: and the laughing and foolery of the mummers had only depressed him. Here, where there was no sound but the breathing of the sheep, and the low whisper of the north wind in the stubble, he was more content: and Consuelo did not seem so far away. He knew she was in yonder, in the warm, well-lighted house, agleam with candles and Christmas fires: no doubt those two young gentlemen, one a lord and the other my lady's son, were making court to her: but somehow Hurdcott did not mind it so much now he could not

actually see her seated between them. He had nothing to complain of: they were — not her equals, no, for no man living was that — but of her own class, and he was only Hurdcott, the man with nothing but a nickname. Out here he could remember her: it was better to remember than to see — when he could only see her with the division of company between them. He had never seen her alone but she had been to him all that he could have wished, much more than he would have dared to hope. The meetings described in this story were not all that had taken place, perhaps half a dozen times they had met, just for a few moments, since the day of the meet of the hounds at the Plough Inn. Nothing worth our relating had been said by him or her: but her least word of friendly greeting was worth his remembering, and would never be forgotten.

Hurdcott had not the least idea that anyone had maligned him to her: he did not know that her unchanged kindness, in the few sentences of speech they had interchanged since, were a proof of her loyalty to a friend in whom she insisted on believing: if he *had* known he could only have worshipped her the same and no more, for his whole self was swallowed up in worship of her.

Basil Hungerford loved to discourse to her, to show her how much he had thought, that she might have a finer idea of him: for he could not get on easily without her estimation. Of his wealth and rank he thought nothing himself, and he would not have cared in the least to make much of himself by their help, even if he had been stupid, which he was not, and could have imagined that she would value him at all for either. Nor did he ever wonder how to please her by his good looks, of which he was quite unconscious, esteeming himself, in fact, rather an ugly fellow. It was her mind, not her fancy or her eye, that he sought to interest: for of

her mind he thought highly, much more really than he thought of herself. Perhaps, after all, he need not have troubled much about the Red Mist. She was a great deal to him, but he was everything to himself.

Mr. Caradoc had heard a good deal about Consuelo from his mother, who wanted him to be interested in someone at home, on the spot; for Lady Caradoc was bored by hearing continually about Cambridge and its intellectualities and superiorities. She was not a bit intellectual herself, and did not want to be superior: no doubt it was all very well for an ambitious young man, who aimed at political distinction, to know everything that people were learning, but a small flirtation in holiday-time must be good for young blood. She was fond of her only son, and ready to be proud of him later on: meanwhile, she knew he was rather full of himself, and did not think it would do him any harm to have a small hole made in the region where young people's hearts ought to be. Consuelo was, she was sure, quite able to look after her own heart — even if there had not been Lord Winterslow to help her: Lady Caradoc did not think, however, that the young lady was in much danger in that quarter either. If her ladyship had really cared for Consuelo's striking up a serious flirtation with her Theodore she would not have said so much about their going in to dinner together. She had done it merely in the hope of worrying Lord Winterslow.

Theodore had been rather surprised to find that Consuelo, as far as beauty and distinction went, was more than equal to his mother's lavish description. He had excellent taste in such matters, and Miss Dauntsey was undoubtedly one of the most striking girls he had met. And she had been the reverse of eager to throw herself at his head. Then, in addition to an uncommon share of loveliness, and a manner that at once convinced him

of her high breeding and birth, in spite of a certain slowness to recognize his own importance, he had perceived that Consuelo was far more intelligent than was, he supposed, usual with girls of her age. Bread and butter misses were not in the least to his fancy.

When Mr. Caradoc said good-night he was quite resolved on calling soon at the Manor House and seeing as much as possible of Consuelo: indeed, he looked forward to a more agreeable time at home than usual.

CHAPTER XXIV

BASIL and Theodore both thought of Consuelo merely in relation to themselves. Hurdcott had no thought of himself except in relation to her. His worship, though only offered to a young girl, was of the best and highest kind, which asks for nothing, and only gives itself.

There are countless numbers of devout persons, whose worship of God consists of nothing but asking favours of Him. But there are others who scarcely think of asking anything, because it seems to their ever-growing appreciation that everything has been done unasked, and everything given out of an imperial generosity that has never needed reminder. The worship of these last turns not to demand but to recognition: they are more and more filled with the exquisite rapture of gratitude that God is Himself. Their adoration can never cease increasing, because the object of it is infinite: if it lay in mere askings it would be stunted to the narrowness of such needs as the asking sort perceive.

Hurdcott's worship had no desires and no hopes. Consuelo was already everything to him, and he never dreamed that he could be anything to her. In the common sense she must always be nothing to him. He asked nothing: for she was herself, and that was all that concerned him — that she should be herself was his happiness.

It was a dark night of flying clouds, so black that, moonless as it was, they could be seen as they drove down from the north before the freezing wind. When he first came out of the lighted barn he had not been able to see them — it had all seemed one opaque block of

darkness. Now he was used to the night, and could see the difference between cloud and sky: even a star or two showed dimly between the rags of drift. It was cold, too, but Hurdcott walked to and fro, and never heeded it. More and more, as the slow night dragged away, his spirit lightened, the sense of depression he had felt in the barn, and almost all the day before, wore away. The lights in the Manor House had long gone out, and those in the village, too, which had been kept up much later than usual. He had the world to himself, and felt no longer alone in it. Naturally enough, his thoughts wandered hither and thither, anchored as they were in one place, and his occupation brought to him the story of his own finding by Cormac three and twenty years ago.

Many a time Cormac had told it to him, not glibly or over readily, but whenever the boy had asked him: and the plain, brief tale had never varied or gathered anything. It was just as we have set it forth long ago in the beginning of this book.

Hurdcott had loved his foster-father, but never as the shepherd had loved him: the father who gives all must always love better than the child who takes everything. It is earth's little reflex of the eternal story of the love of God and man's shabby requital.

While Cormac lived, the boy had not even been conscious of the great depth and strength of the man's tenderness for his foundling child. To-night, perhaps, it was first fully revealed to him in the light of his own love of which he was not aware now.

To-night, at all events, a thousand forgotten proofs of Cormac's exquisite, unselfish devotion arose out of the past, and crowded about the young man's mind upbraidingly. Hurdcott felt his dark cheeks burn with the shame of his long unheeded selfishness. Cormac had never asked any return, had given everything, and never

stinted because the receiver was graceless. Poor as a shepherd must be, the Irishman had saved money, for he had nothing to spend on till Hurdcott came. Then he saved for the child's sake: but when the child grew into a wilful boy, and the boy swiftly changed to a youth more wilful and more wild, then Cormac's little stores were speedily diminished. How is money spent? Hurdcott himself could scarcely tell now how so many pounds had gone: but when a lad indulges every selfish fancy, when he likes smart clothes, and is set on being chief in a wild and wasteful company, all the more wasteful because poor, money melts like the snow, that took hours to fall, when the heedless sun shines on it.

Because Cormac gave without grumbling, Hurdcott had been ready to believe his companions who all declared that the solitary shepherd was rich. It seemed to him now that he had hardly even given a "Thank you" for the money he had gone on asking so gracelessly. Nothing is more disagreeable than expressing thanks for what one has had no right to take: it is much pleasanter to turn the subject, and be off and hear one's self applauded for open-handed spending. Now, for the first time, Hurdcott saw, what he had not chosen to see at the moment, that poor Cormac had been ashamed of being asked, not because he was reluctant to give, but because of the sense he could not smother down that the lad was wrong to take.

It is easy for you and me to say that Cormac was wrong, too. Hurdcott made no such hateful excuse for himself. The shame was all his own: his foster-father had only been too good. God help those who can shuffle off the blame of their selfishness on the backs of them who have loved too much.

Even when Cormac had died there was a little money left, and that little the shepherd insisted should be all

for his son. He had made Hurdcott promise to spend none of it on a funeral.

“Bury me here up on the down, where I’ve lived by the sheep. I’m not of their religion here, and I’ve never lived among them. There’s no priest in these parts. I’d liever you than any parson to lay me to my rest. When God comes to judgment He’ll know where to find me. I’d know if it was you I was looking for: only I could never judge, I’m too soft.”

Hurdcott remembered it all very well. How the shepherd had grown quickly weaker, never confessing any pain. How he had got thinner and thinner: and at last had been unable to walk about. Till then the lad had hardly taken any notice. Old folk, and to him his foster-father of course had always seemed old, must expect illness: one cannot be young for ever, or expect to feel as sturdy as those who are growing up. If he had shown any care or sympathy he could not remember it; he wished he could. But Cormac, as he drew nearer to the last great silence of all, had talked less and less, and it had irked the lad to sit beside him mum, and all the while talkative comrades waiting for him down in the village. So, many a time, he had been glad of any excuse to slip away, especially if he had been able to tell himself it was to get medicine. Once he had made that excuse, and forgotten the medicine till he got back: then he had, indeed, been ashamed, but Cormac had smilingly bade him never mind.

“Medicine or no medicine’s all the same, lad,” he had declared. “A bottle less won’t hasten my going; nor a bottle more keep me back.”

Hurdcott had felt half angry with his father for this talk of going: old folk can be out of sorts and not die of it.

“Don’t you be gloomy,” he had said, “you’ve no call to be talking that way. You’ll never make up your

mind to go anywhere without me, see if you do. We've been everywhere together where you *have* been, since you had me first. You'd miss me too much."

"I can hardly think but I *shall* miss you," Cormac had answered, wondering, as he was always wondering, if he loved the lad too much.

But Cormac did go, and Hurdcott was not even with him to see him off, on the journey of which none of us know rightly whether it be long or short. For a day or so before he died, the old shepherd had seemed better, for he suffered no pain, though he knew that every hour he grew weaker. He had no hunger, and could not bring himself to eat. About tea-time Hurdcott asked him if he should stop with him, showing, whether he would or no, that he wanted to be off somewhere.

"Nay, lad. I'm none lonely, ever. Go you now, and you'll be all the sooner back."

That was all he said by way of asking his son to come home to him early.

It was winter, and the sheep were folded: when Hurdcott was gone, the old man sat still by the brazier outside their hut: he was so weak that he hardly felt even tired: but his thoughts roamed high and low, mostly to the clear heights above these mists. And soon he fell into a light sleep, and dreamed of the presence of the Man who had been a carpenter, but called himself a shepherd. He held a struggling black lamb in His arms, but would not let it struggle free, only holding it the closer. So Cormac's pleasant sleep deepened, and when he woke the Man and he were face to face.

When Hurdcott came back it was late night: the brazier had died out, but the full moon shed her light on Cormac's upturned face, as pure as it: and there was on his father's face the smile of one who had found love requited at last, even Hurdcott could see that.

Hurdcott had never liked hearing about religion: it

was the lore of a strange country in which he would not be at home, whose tongue he would not learn. Without knowing the word he knew that Cormac's inner life was supernatural, and his own life, the life he liked, was altogether natural, made up of tangible, material sights and sounds and gratifications: and he had an instinctive surmise that the two lives were opposite, inimical. His restless southern blood cried out for pleasure: he did not care for happiness. With the insolence of youth he put down to the stupidity of age Cormac's radiant happiness. As yet, the lad had hardly any conscience; after all, it takes love to awake any true conscience, and his love was unrisen, beneath the horizon, yet. Instead he had, while Cormac lived, only an uneasy consciousness that religion must be an austere monitress. He was sure she would have no smooth things to tell him. Of God, he could not have lived with his foster-father without learning something, but he was perversely armed against learning properly, and learned amiss; God had invented religion to keep folks in order, and he wanted to be disorderly. So he said nothing, but regarded God, as millions do, till they persuade themselves He is nothing at all, as the arch enemy.

It was a triumph of perversity that he could have known Cormac, and grown up with such a repugnance against his father's only Friend. Perhaps he was jealous. Anyway, he told himself that Cormac's own intimate tenderness for God was merely due to the fact that, being old and peculiar, he never wanted to do anything that even God could object to. Then Cormac could never say all he felt—who can who loves as he did? At best a man of slow speech, he was tongue-tied by reverence. He was afraid of wronging his Lover by poor, unworthy talk of Him. He had none of the self-complacent glibness that makes some obstinate preachers revolting. Of his own long intimacy

with his Friend he would not have chattered if he could: it was only half *his* secret. And though he had, at times, and often, a dread that he had not done his duty by the boy, had not been insistent enough in trying to teach him, there lay underneath all such searchings of heart a simplicity of faith that silenced them. After all, it was God's own business. God, not he, had made the lad; if no stuttered words of his could reach beneath the shallows of the young, foolish heart, God could speak for Himself, and must when the time came. If his own love was too small a thing to overcome youth's perversity, there was a Love of omnipotent strength that could conquer indifference at last. Cormac never mistook himself for Providence, as so many "real" parents are apt to do, laying out the chart of their children's lives and upbraiding them as almost impious for mapping other courses for themselves.

Long ago we spoke of Consuelo's having discerned instinctively the evidences of some strong and rare influence that had left its mark on Hurdcott. Cormac was the influence: and one result of the lad's growth under it was, it would seem, remarkable. He had spoken of himself to Consuelo as a good for nought: and this chapter will have shown that he did not accuse himself unfairly. But from Cormac he had taken, insensibly, and by mere neighbourhood — may there not be an infection of good as well as an infection of evil? — the habit of a singular purity. Among the comrades he had chosen for himself he learned unworthy conduct enough: but he did not pick up foulness, of act, or speech, or thought. He heard what was bad, and grew familiar with the sound of it: but his words did not become unclean, because his thoughts were never unclean: that which he heard too much of for it to shock him was, nevertheless, repugnant. It may be that some subtle sense and consciousness that this was so God

granted to Cormac as a part of his consolation in the midst of disappointment.

That which Jocha had said against Hurdcott was a lie. As he walked to and fro by the sheep-fold to-night, and the chill night dragged on, he thought of that among the rest: of the accusation the girl had publicly brought against him, and of how it had been believed. It was a three-year-old story now; in the year of Cormac's death he had, as he supposed then, fallen in love with her. She was esteemed a village beauty, and the lad was only one among many admirers: the rest older than himself, and craftier. When Jocha found herself in trouble he was made scapegoat, and her story had been accepted: it was only his word against hers.

Such a tale, in such times, and in a Chalkshire village, would not have made much difference to a young man's public character, but it made a difference in him. His self-respect was badly injured, and he was so friendless in any true sense, and so young, that he grew more reckless. His companions became worse than ever, and he steadily lost character: but the time he met Consuelo he was on the road to losing all that he had ever gathered from his bringing-up: which was more than he knew, for Cormac had done more for his foster-son than either son or father were aware of.

CHAPTER XXV

ON the afternoon of the day after Christmas, Mr. Caradoc called at the Manor House to make the usual polite enquiries concerning the healths of his hostesses of the evening before. Consuelo and Basil were just starting for a walk, and Theodore was asked to join them; Priscilla, who had been vaguely aware that she ought to accompany the young couple as duenna, but disliked walking as much as she disliked anything except foxes, was glad to find herself relieved of her duty. Amelia was gone to see how Uncle Stratford did, and Priscilla imagined that there was much to do at home, "straightening" after the dinner party.

There must be silver to put away, and best table napkins to rescue from Miriam, who was quite capable, in her mistress's estimation, of polishing lamps with them.

"My mother hopes you and Lord Winterslow will come round and drink a dish of tea," said Mr. Caradoc to Consuelo: Lady Caradoc had not said a "dish," but her son employed the phrase to give a semi-jocular air to the invitation, in which also the aunts had been included.

"You'd better ask them, too," she had said. "It's not pretty inviting people's guests and leaving them out. But they won't come. Uncle Stratford is sure to be bilious to-day after all that turkey and sausage-meat, and the old girls will have to go round and be snapped at. If I had sixty thousand pounds, I'd keep nieces on purpose."

It was not a long walk to Lady Caradoc's. She lived

in what was called by the Dauntseys, "the other Manor House," just as her Ladyship spoke of "the other Manor House" when alluding to the Squire's house. Three villages run together along about a mile and a quarter of highroad, Summer Avon, Earl's Avon, and Avon St. Thomas. Earl's Avon is the nearest to Chalkminster and belonged once to the great Plantagenet Earls of Chalkshire, who owed their existence to Fair Rosamond. In the middle lies Summer Avon, and further from Chalkminster on the Marlchurch road comes Avon St. Thomas, so called because St. Thomas of Canterbury once stayed there on his way to the Constitutions of Clarendon. There is a Manor House for each village, and in the days of which we speak, there was also an old church for each of the three parishes. In the Manor House of Earl's Avon a farmer lived; but the land round the Manor House of Avon St. Thomas was farmed by a Mr. Grave who had a house of his own in Sherdown Village, a mile away, so he sublet the Manor House to Lady Caradoc. It was a goodish square house with barns all round it, and a pretty green prospect of water-meadows and down. It suited Lady Caradoc to pay a small rent, and when she dated her letters "The Manor House, Avon St. Thomas," her correspondents could not see the adjacent barns and cowsheds.

"Everybody one meets," observed Mr. Caradoc, as they walked through the village, "looks Mondayish. They are disconcerted by having been to Church on a weekday."

"They are easily disconcerted," Consuelo replied, "if one service, half an hour long, on Christmas Day, can do the business."

"Half an hour is not bad for half a sovereign," Theodore protested. "Your kinsman, Mr. Stratford, bought the income of Earl's Avon and Summer Avon

from the Dean and Chapter forty years ago, and he only has to pay a parson ten shillings to come out from Chalkminster and hold one service every Sunday and Christmas Day, and also on the feast of St. Charles the Martyr on the 30th January. As the two parishes are worth seven hundred a year, he must have done pretty well."

"How about *your* parish? I have never heard your church bell ringing."

"It's ringing now; or tolling, which comes to much the same thing, as there's only one bell. There must be a wedding or a funeral. It's not jerky enough for a wedding, I suppose it's a funeral. Our church is shut up; that's why my mother and I had the honour of saying our prayers in yours yesterday. But we have a parson, the Reverend Mr. Toogood. His name must have frightened him, for he does not err on that side." Here Mr. Caradoc tried to shoot a meaning glance at Basil, who was not ready for it.

"There are only ninety-four parishioners in Avon St. Thomas," Mr. Caradoc continued. "And, as all but ourselves are Methodists, Mr. Toogood is too practical to compete with Bethesda Chapel, which, you may have learned from the inscription on the board outside, is none other than the Gate of Heaven. So he has shut up our church and there has been no service in it for eleven years. But people will die and they have a prejudice in favour of being buried, so Rev. Toogood consigns them to the dust—there is a fee for it. And, so long as no one wants him to marry himself, he is also willing to join together those who do not wish to be put asunder: that also costs three and sixpence a couple."

It was quite new to Consuelo to hear a gentleman talk of his own religion in the tone adopted by Mr. Caradoc. At Palermo there were, as she had heard, revolutionists who wanted to upset everything, religion

included. But Mr. Caradoc, in his excellent clothes, and with his superior manner, was not her idea of a revolutionist. Nor was he one: but he was on the side of reform, and it was unfortunate that he lived in a parish whose clergyman was, frankly, altogether scandalous.

Consuelo did not ask any questions which could encourage further enlargement on Mr. Toogood's iniquities, nor did Basil: Mr. Caradoc put it down to delicacy, as one was a Roman Catholic and the other not a Christian at all. He changed the subject himself by an easy gradation.

"The church itself is rather interesting," he said, "and dates from King Stephen's time, or some of it, at all events. One arch looks to me even older — Saxon, I should say; and the font might almost be British. There was probably an Abbey at Avonsbury before the second conversion of England by Augustine. Some say that all the villages hereabouts were under its jurisdiction. If that were so, the font in our church may be a relic of the old British Christianity before the Saxons came."

Basil attended courteously, he was interested in archeological matters; and, as he did not much care for Mr. Caradoc, he was the more studious in politeness.

"Your own name is British, is it not?" he asked.

"Oh, yes! Welsh, we have to call it now. We were once princes in Wales, and my grandfather believed that nearly half of the present Principality belonged to him — but, unfortunately, he could not leave it to me!"

Mr. Caradoc laughed lightly as he said this with the air of superiority to pedigree which is commonly affected by those who know they have one.

They had now reached the end of the village, where the road turned sharply down to the river and was no longer fringed with cottages and cottage-gardens. Further on was a water-mill, then the rectory of Avon

St. Thomas, and, close beside it, the Manor House. On their right hand was a large field, the further end of which ran up to an oddly entrenched hill, with so many fine old trees as to give it almost the air of a little park. At the end of the field nearest the road stood the church all alone on the brow of a low bulge in the ground. It was a quaint, very small building, and might have been as old as Mr. Caradoc said.

"You see I was right; it is a funeral," he observed, and his companions saw that there was in fact a little group of country folk in the churchyard, whose subdued bearing and sad-coloured garments did not suggest a wedding. They were evidently gathered about an open grave; the chalk out of it was piled up at one end, and there stood the parson whose leggings showed beneath a short and very dirty surplice. It was a still afternoon, more like November than late December; the north wind of the night before had fallen, and the voice of the reader could be heard coming in odd stutters and gabblings.

"If there was a gale," remarked Mr. Caradoc, "you'd say he was rocking in it. It's *too bad*: by Jove, he's gone — fallen into the pit that they digged for another."

It was true; Consuelo turned away, and the two young men followed her, both silent, though one of them would have liked to say a great deal. From the mourning group in the churchyard came muttered hisses, and abuse, mixed with the sobs of women.

"One good thing," Lady Caradoc observed coolly, when her son told her what they had seen, after the greetings and enquiries were over. "One good thing is it will be the end of him. The bishop will *have* to oust him now: let's hope a decent man will be put in his place: but not with pretty daughters — I can't have you falling in love with young women next door, Theo-

dore: and it would be a bore if the wife were too friendly. Nothing could be more tiresome than to have a person of that sort meeting you every time you went out — meeting *me* I mean. Do you suppose they'll *bury* him? 'Twould be the best thing now he's there, and his best chance of securing Christian burial; he'd read half the service, and that's more than he deserves. Odd, though, to read your own funeral, eh? And your aunts are none the worse for last night, Donna Consuelo? An excellent dinner, and enough for twenty: 'twas a good thing we invited ourselves or you would have all overeaten yourselves like Uncle Stratford. I did my best for him — engaging him in conversation: but he was afraid of me: old widowers are frightened of youngish widows: he was terrified because he was tempted, that's the way always; 'Lady Caradoc and Mr. Rupert Stratford' wouldn't sound bad, and a republican would love to marry a title. I daresay he thinks I should become Lady Stratford, or perhaps he thinks he would be Sir Rupert by marriage. You want a step-father, too, Theodore; and I'd see the sixty thousand was settled on myself, and you should have half. Thirty thousand is not to be sneezed at, and I should feel bound to settle the other thirty on my third venture. Don't look bored, Theodore; I never do when you are superior; Lord Winterslow, I was glad to see you at church yesterday. I hope you'll not go on being a Bud-ite; young men shouldn't belong to sects that have no place of worship in the neighbourhood; especially in your position; it sets a bad example to the common people: and it gives that uncle of yours a handle with the House of Lords: don't play into his hands. He'll make out you're a heathen with four wives, and that would horrify the Prince Regent who only has two, with all his faults, and does his best to get rid of one of them. And remember, there are

bishops among the peers, who can hardly be expected to vote for a Bud-ite, is it Budite or Bunian? Not the latter, I hope: it sounds like Pilgrim's Progress on your feet . . . Yes, you may ring, Theodore, and I daresay I'll stop when tea comes in."

But she did not. Having ascertained who took sugar, her Ladyship went on:

"Donna Consuelo, I am told you snubbed my poor Theodore last night unmercifully. I wish you'd teach me how: but if I try, he only swears in Welsh — No, Theodore, you are *not* quoting Greek what-you-call-'ems — Iambics, is it? Your father made just those sounds when there was not enough luncheon and he dropped people in without warning, and *he* certainly could not quote anything. He couldn't even spell 'Wednesday' after ten years of married life, and I remember his first letter after we were engaged began 'Dr. Go'; for he knew my name was Josephine, and that George began with a G, so he thought Joe might as well. 'Dr.' was a contraction for 'dear,' to avoid the risk of confusing me with a live venison. He said if your name was Caradoc you could spell how you liked. You may have got your good looks from your father, Theodore, but your brains were passed on to you by me from *my* father — they mostly skip a generation (sometimes more), like gout."

As Lady Caradoc did all the talking herself, Consuelo was disposed to wonder why she should care for company: and, as she did not think that her Ladyship liked her or Basil, she could not quite understand why they had been sent for to tea. The truth was that Lady Caradoc, like a class more numerous than is supposed, never had any special reason for what she did or said. Lydia Bennet bought the ugly bonnet because she might as well buy it as not, and Lady Caradoc said what she did say on much the same principle.

CHAPTER XXVI

"I wonder," Consuelo observed on the way home, "whether Mr. Caradoc bores his mother as much as she bores him."

"I like her best," said Basil, smilingly but without relevance. "He never amuses me at all."

Consuelo laughed. It was not, she imagined, Mr. Caradoc's object to amuse his contemporaries.

"But he instructs one," she suggested. "I learned more about Sicily from him last night than nineteen years of residence there had taught me."

"And it was my own fault if I did not thoroughly understand India after Lady Caradoc had sent him and me to the smoking-room to see the carved chimney-piece. He forgot all about the chimney-piece, but he gave me the whole history of caste in a nutshell, and all the reasons why the British in India should encourage it."

As they passed the smithy, nearly opposite Bethesda Chapel, they met Hurdcott, and in the light that streamed from the forge across the road, Consuelo recognized him: it was, of course, quite dark though scarcely five o'clock. Consuelo stopped for a few moments and spoke to Hurdcott; then she and Basil moved on and she told him how the young man had brought her, on the night of her arrival, from the Hut to her uncle's door.

While Consuelo and Hurdcott had stood, exchanging their brief greetings, in the bar of red light from the smithy, Basil had nothing to do but watch their faces: he now fell silent, though he had been rather more talkative than usual at the beginning of their homeward

walk. Mr. Caradoc retired into insignificant perspective: Basil clearly perceived that Consuelo was not interested in him. But, whether he would or no, he himself was conscious that Hurdcott was interesting. Afraid of seeming indifferent to anything that concerned her, he forced himself to talk.

"I never," he said, "saw anyone like that young man here."

"I never saw anyone like him anywhere," Consuelo answered frankly.

Basil paused a moment and added:

"You are right. He is not like anyone I have met. He is extraordinarily handsome . . ."

"Is he? I never thought of it."

"No. I can understand that. It is not that which makes him so different from ordinary young peasants, though really one sees very few handsome peasants here."

The rarity or frequent occurrence of handsome peasants was not a theme on which apparently Consuelo was prepared to enlarge.

"Now I think of it you are right," she said, dismissing the subject in one sentence. "In Sicily it seems to me most quite young people were more or less handsome, while here very few are: is it the climate or what? But I never think of that young man as a peasant."

"You think his class matters as little as his good looks?"

"That would be thinking of both. I say it never occurs to me to think of either."

As Basil was silent for a moment she added with a light laugh:

"Do *you* think of *my* class when you talk to me? All those sort of things are not oneself."

"Of course I do not think of your class: but as we belong to the same it takes itself for granted." He

thought, but did not say, that he could not help thinking of her looks.

"Your retort is very sensible. To tell the truth, when I said just now that I never think of Hurdcott as a peasant, I meant that he does not seem to me like a peasant."

"Is Hurdcott his name? It has a frowning, menacing sound."

"He has no name. Hurdcott is what the village folk call him."

Basil did not want to talk about him, nor, in truth, did Consuelo care about discussing him with Basil; but two people are often unable to drop a subject, and go on with it, each with an instinctive sense that the other would rather change it. If Consuelo had been obviously willing to say all there was to be said about the man with no name, Basil would have been better satisfied.

"He is not of the local type. You say he has no name. It sounds as if there were a romance."

Consuelo in a few words told him nearly all the reader knows about the finding of Hurdcott by the Irish shepherd.

"It is a romance," Basil remarked, in the tone of one who was interested. Though Hurdcott himself was an unwelcome theme, he was well-bred enough to talk freely on it. Then he laughed and said:

"Is it not a little odd? Here we are in Chalkshire, in a corner of England the most out-of-the-way, where you would say only genuine Chalkshire folk would be found. And behold the *Dramatis Personæ*! You half Sicilian, myself half Burmese: Mr. Caradoc half Welsh: the romantic shepherd whole Irish, and his foster son no one knows what, but clearly not plain Chalkshire. I do not believe in his gypsy origin. He is dark, like ourselves, but his darkness is not a bit gypsy."

"No, I noticed that. He is dark in *my* way, don't you think?"

"Well, he can hardly be Sicilian," Basil answered, somehow resenting the suggestion of even a hint of common complexion between Consuelo and Hurdcott.

"Nothing would seem less possible," she agreed. "Yet he might have any sort of foreign blood, or half foreign, since we know nothing about it. And, as you point out, here am I half Sicilian. I have just trodden on something. Wait a moment . . ."

Had it been in India, Basil might have suggested a snake: but they were not in India and Consuelo's tone was by no means startled.

They both stooped down and he picked up what she had felt under her light shoe. The wind of the night before had dried the roads and there was no mud.

"It feels," Consuelo said, "like a small leather bag, fastened to a broken string."

There was no moon whose light could help them, but they were now near home and over the wrought-iron gate in front of the door of the Manor House a lamp was hung, not always lighted, but lighted now in honour of the Manor House having a visitor.

They walked on and examined what Consuelo had picked up. It was in fact a small, ill-made sheepskin bag containing something hard, and out of one broken corner hung an inch or so of fine gold chain. It seemed to have been worn round someone's neck by a thin line of leather like a shoe-lace now worn through. Inside (only Consuelo and Basil never saw what was inside), was a heavy gold medal, wrapped in a tiny remnant of what had once been part of a baby's linen garment. If Consuelo had seen the medal it might have set her on the track of its owner's identity.

As she and Basil stood still in the light of the lamp over the iron gate, someone came towards them, round

the sharp corner in the direction they had just followed — the corner opposite the cobbler's shop, where another road led down to Summer Avon Church. From the corner to where they stood was a straight piece of road leading by several cottages to the Manor House, and thence between the high thatched walls of the Manor House garden on one side and the Manor House orchard on the other to Earl's Avon Church. They could hear that it was a man's footstep, though they could not see him: and they paused because something in the sound of it suggested that, whoever it was, he was searching for something he had lost.

When he came into the narrow ring of feeble light in which they themselves stood, they recognized Hurdcott.

Consuelo still held in her hand what she had picked up, and the young man's glance fell on it as he uncovered in salutation. The glimmer of the oil lamp was much weaker than the ruddy glow from the forge had been, but Basil again noted Hurdcott's beauty, with a sort of honourable reluctance. There are all sorts of degrees of jealousy, and within an hour or two Basil had been attacked by two different kinds of it. He only found out himself that he had been wildly jealous of Caradoc when he began to feel how little occasion there was for it. He did not now know that he was jealous, but in quite another way, of Hurdcott, though the fact that he felt bound to admit the young fellow's singular attractiveness, and admitted it against the grain, might have enlightened him.

"We waited," Consuelo said, speaking for Basil and herself, "because we had found something: and before we had time to wonder who its owner could be, we heard you coming, and you seemed to be looking for something. Is this yours?"

She held the little sheepskin bag out towards Hurdcott who answered without at once taking it.

"Yes. I wear it round my neck; and the lace was nearly worn through. I meant to have got a new one to-morrow. It must have broken. There is a thick gold medal in it, with a saint on one side and a shield on the other with a sort of crown over it. Will you open it and see?"

He smiled as he said this, partly as if he were offering to prove his ownership by describing what he could not have seen if the little bag, all stitched up, had not been his own, and partly because he knew his claim was not doubted, and his offer would not be accepted.

Consuelo smiled, too, and put the bag into his hand.

"The medal hangs on a short chain," Hurdcott added. "And when Cormac found me long ago, it was round my neck. But my neck grew too big, and he made a little bag for it, and so I wore it like that. I missed it soon after you and the gentleman left me, and I came back to see if I could find it."

He then thanked them both, and drew back as if he knew he had no right to detain them longer: and after again saluting, turned away in the direction he had come.

Consuelo and Basil stood a moment where he left them and then the latter opened the iron gate for her.

"He has good manners," Basil remarked in a low voice, "or a good manner, which is it? He told just enough — if he had gone on and on it would have been only tiresome. Our having found the thing made it natural he should say something as to what it was: to say more would have seemed like talking too much about himself."

Consuelo walked up the steps and did not notice by any remark of her own what Basil had said about Hurdcott.

cott's manners. One half resents hearing one's friends praised for what the praiser takes for granted in himself. And she had an instinct that Basil was being generous to one immeasurably beneath him. She wondered, capriciously, what the Awakened One had thought of rank: she knew now that he had been a prince and had run away from it: perhaps she might as well have remembered that Basil had almost run away from his own dignities. He knocked at the door, and Consuelo instead of answering what he had said, remarked, as if following up her own thoughts:

"Whoever put the medal round his neck was certainly a Catholic — that does not sound like an English gypsy. Cormac was Irish, and a Catholic, and must have told him the head on one side of the medal was a saint's."

"How about the coat of arms on the other side?"

"It may not have been really a coat of arms. Many religious orders have a shield with some sort of badge on it, and generally with a non-heraldic crown over the device: though the Dominicans do use actual arms — some modification of those of the Guzmans."

Then Miriam opened the door and they went in.

CHAPTER XXVII

ON the day following, Basil proposed that he and Consuelo should ride. He had his own horse and that which William had ridden, for William had on Christmas Eve received some invitation on his own account, and remained to attend to the two horses, and his master, to whom he acted as valet-de-chambre without portfolio. Basil did not much need his services, but William liked doing any work which was not precisely his duty, and never forgot that his master was a Lord, whatever Basil himself might do.

When he brought hot water and set out the shaving things, he remarked in a disengaged manner that it was likely to be just the day for a ride.

"Yes. And I could ride the chestnut and give Miss Dauntsey Trinacria, but there's no side-saddle."

"Beg your pardon, my Lord, but when I slipped over for your lordship's things, I brought one. You never know when a thing'll be wanted, as the Count said in the revolution when they told him that his head was *not* to be cut off."

"What was his name?" Basil demanded severely.

"He preferred not to mention it, being a good un. Names was very un'olesome just then as 'appened to have a title in front of 'em. But my uncle's last place was with the family — down Twicknam way, or them parts. They were called Emigrants, though they never went to America."

Abandoning the attempt to identify the French nobleman, Basil much more reluctantly abandoned his

bed, and William began brushing clothes over which he hissed as though they had been a horse.

"Don't do that. One can't hear oneself speak," his master entreated.

"Beg your Lordship's pardon, didn't know you was saying anything, my Lord."

"Whistling is worse."

"'Tis along of having had the thrush as an infant. The 'abit stuck to me, as it does to the birds. No disrespect, my lord."

"If I was to knock you down and say 'No violence intended, William,' you'd think just the same of me."

"Not I, my lord, I'd think you was altered considerable."

"Perhaps if you can't help whistling you had better brush my clothes outside."

"The maids 'ud hear me and come and talk, my lord. I shouldn't get along at all."

After breakfast Basil proposed the ride, and Consuelo at once consented. She had a shrewd idea that her aunts would be glad to get their guest out of the way. It gave them, she could see, an unnatural feeling to be sitting in the drawing-room all morning doing nothing.

"There's a great deal to be said for the English climate *I* think," Consuelo remarked as they rode out of the village. The sky was quite blue, and the south wind soft and balmy.

"Anyway there's plenty to say *about* it. Instead of two seasons as there used to be in India, there are at least a dozen here, and they are not confined to any particular sequence or special time of the year. Where are we going?"

"I should like to go to Avonsbury. I've something to do there."

"Is it a secret, or may I know what it is?"

"If it had been a secret I should not have told you anything about it, but have gone over to Avonsbury after you had gone away."

Basil laughed and asked her if that were a hint that his visit was long enough already.

"Perhaps I shall go home to-morrow," he added. "No time was mentioned when your aunts invited me."

"They never did invite you. You said you were coming — or rather you came and broke it to us that you intended to stay on."

"Tell me your secret."

"There is a priest at Avonsbury: chaplain to the nuns at the Abbey, and I want to see him."

"But the Abbey isn't an abbey now. The nuns disappeared at the Reformation: Prior's Kitty lived in it, whom Uncle Stratford would only hear of as Her Grace, and Gay wrote the Beggars' Opera in it, and Pope used to stay there, and Swift was asked but wouldn't come . . . is your priest chaplain to the ghosts of the nuns whom Henry VIII turned adrift?"

"It is odd you should talk of ghosts, for it is on account of a ghost-story that I want to see this priest. But the nuns he says Mass for are quite alive. They are French and rent the Abbey from the Duke of Queensbury if it still belongs to him."

"What is your ghost-story, and why should it make you want to see a priest? I believe *I've* seen a ghost."

Consuelo turned to him quickly and asked:

"Lately?"

"On the night I came: the night before Christmas Day."

"Then you shall tell me your story before I tell you mine," she said seriously. His own tone had been half joking.

"Very well. Only I'm afraid you will be disap-

pointed for you will say I should have been awake and I'm sure I was asleep."

"Go on. I never read prefaces till I've finished the books. When there's anything in them, they spoil the story."

"I will skip the preface. But there must be a first chapter. When I arrived the other night I noticed particularly for the first time the portrait over the fireplace in your aunts' drawing-room."

"My aunt and I were talking of it when you came in."

"That I must have perceived, and that may have been why I gave special attention to it. After dinner, when we came in from the dining-room, I happened to sit opposite to it and was again struck by the portrait. It must represent an ancestress of yours, for though it is not in the least like you, it has a peculiar likeness to your younger aunt."

"Yes, it is. It is the portrait of Lady Camilla Dauntsey."

"Your ghost?"

"Yes."

"And mine, too. Well, that's the end of Chapter I. I suppose that, talking as I was to you, I only gave a sub-attention to the picture which was trying to interest me. It revenged itself, as things do to which one gives a half notice during the day, by asserting itself when one can no longer decide for oneself which thought shall be uppermost. When one is asleep it often happens that a person one met during the day and scarcely attended to, insists on not being ignored — in a dream. I will give a trivial illustration: a week ago, perhaps, I was reading and much occupied with my book. My old butler came in and said that the coachman wanted to tell me how one of the horses had suddenly gone lame. I would not attend properly and said it wasn't

my fault, the coachman must either cure the horse himself or get a veterinary surgeon. I went on reading all the time. That night I dreamt of lame horses, and lame coachmen, and lame butlers and lame veterinary surgeons till I insisted on waking up and getting rid of them."

He laughed and Consuelo joined him.

"Serves you right," she declared. "You ought to have dreamt of being lame yourself. I expect you care more for riding than for horses. That's not being a sportsman."

"No human being ever accused me of setting up for a sportsman. Shall I go on with the story?"

"Oh, yes. But you got in your preface at the end of Chapter I. That's not fair and it's not original. It's a very common trick with story-tellers."

"Chapter II, then — but you were not thinking of my story just then. *A quoi pense-tu?*"

"Je pense à la mort de Louis Seize."

Basil did not know that this was a sort of proverb and looked puzzled.

"I only meant," she explained laughing, "that I wasn't thinking of anything in particular — or that I was not going to tell you."

What she had been thinking really was that it seemed odd that a man who cared so much for every form of life should be indifferent to suffering or sickness in an animal.

"Chapter II once more. I went to bed, and, as usual to sleep. I hate preliminaries: and always go to sleep at once. They had made a huge fire and it burned for hours. At last I dreamt — That I was where I was, in bed, only I dreamt that I was no longer asleep."

"Perhaps you weren't."

"How could I dream if I was not asleep? And I dreamt that a lady was standing near my bed, dressed in

royal-blue satin, the lady of the picture in fact. But older than in the picture, older by ten or twelve years and with a different expression. The portrait has a hard, selfish stare, and looks haughty, worldly, insolent and prosperous: in my dream she was haggard, weary, shuddering, with the look of one from whom the world has turned; her beautiful hands wandered about helplessly, her fine jewels were all gone, and the smart dress was worn and stained. Now you will believe I was asleep and it was a dream — for on her head there was a thin powdering of snow, and on her shoulders, too.”

“What made you feel so sure in your dream that it was snow? Why should it not be powder?”

“Powder was not worn then . . . at the date of your Lady Camilla.”

“You are wonderfully accurate in your dreams as to dates and ladies’ costumes.”

“I am always accurate. Well, it couldn’t be powder for another reason; powder does not melt, and when this lady moved away and stood by the hearth, in a heartbroken attitude, the white on her hair and on her shoulders did slowly melt and a drop or two fell into the fender.”

“And when you awoke were there stains of these wet drops on it?”

“I did not look. I went on sleeping till morning.”

“And now,” said Consuelo, who half suspected he was altogether laughing at her, “I suppose you are going to tell me that you read all this in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*.”

“The *Gentleman’s Magazine* has not published itself during the last three days.”

“Oh, I meant before you ever came to stay with us. The story, my aunt says, has been told in it more than once by different gentlemen who have slept in that room.”

She then explained how they had been talking over the bit of family legend on Christmas Eve, just before he arrived, and related all she had then heard about Lady Camilla.

"My theory is that poor Lady Camilla is not yet in heaven," she added, and, as Basil did not believe in heaven, he thought she was very likely right, though he did not say so. "And I want to ask the priest at Avonsbury to say Masses for her soul."

For some time neither of them said anything. It was true that his manner of telling his ghost story or dream had been half mocking, half frivolous: and he perceived that Consuelo was serious, and also that she was not thinking of him but of what he had told her. He was not the man to treat lightly anyone else's religious beliefs, and certainly he was not disposed to make light of her belief in Purgatory.

They had left the Valley with its trees and river and were now upon the empty downs; here and there a patch of cloud-shadow darkened the wide stretches of pale, faded buff. Far away the spire of Chalkminster Cathedral pricked up above the plain, much further away to the northwest the White Horse seemed to hang in the air. Now and then a thick cloud of starlings fluttered up, and sank down again a hundred yards away, as if a handful of titanic black dust had been flung up from the earth. There was a patch of ploughed land dotted with the white breasts of plovers whose bodies were invisible as they sat motionless: perhaps they knew that the white spots on the dark brown earth looked like so many flints. Dogbury Rings, behind them on the other side of the valley, seemed ever so high up: the Beacon, away on their right as they rode, hardly looked like the highest point of all the plain. It was in full sunlight, and looked like a huge awning of pale green satin shot with white.

Presently, after a short canter on the smooth turf, they drew rein and let the horses rest while they looked around the wide stretches of plain.

"What miles one can see! and not a house anywhere. One would not think that in such a little crowded place as England there would be leagues and leagues of emptiness like this," he said.

"I like it more and more every day," she answered. "I thought a plain was flat: and you cannot go half a mile here without going up a hill and down a hill and up again."

"And how many colours there are! Purple and white, and a green that turns pale while you watch, and grows white, too, and yellowish drab, and fawn-colour that flushes into pink, and blue and white over all."

Then they rode on, and down a very steep hill to a place called Stock Bottom.

"That double row of lime trees looks like an avenue leading to a fine entrance-door, but there is no house at all," he said. "The unfulfilled suggestion deepens the sense of loneliness."

Half a mile further on they came to a twist of white road between high banks, that presently were broken on one side by an enormous chalk pit: on the other side a short lane ended in a straw-rick, beyond which the vacant down stretched away again in huge motionless waves.

"This place looks wicked," said Basil, "as if a crime were to be committed here."

"What is a crime?" It seemed to her that in a philosophy that denied law there could be no crime.

"A knot in the cord that leads to nothing."

Consuelo was not in the mood for discussions of his ideas, which seemed to her too impersonal for personal appeal.

“It is odd,” she said, “that since I came here no one but you — whose philosophy is not a religion, you say — should have spoken to me about religion. My uncle, my aunts, their uncle, have none of them ever alluded to it.”

“Mr. Caradoc?”

“He only alluded to it in the way of sarcasm. Yet he is a Christian, as they are.”

“My knowledge of Christianity is all from books: perhaps they are less disposed to talk of what is in common between them and you because of what is different, the extent of the difference being probably a matter of uncertainty. They only know you have been brought up with the Catholic Church, of which they have very vague ideas, all around you.” He laughed and added:

“They may be afraid of having to be shocked. Uncle Stratford for instance, who certainly knows nothing whatever about Purgatory, would be extremely uncomfortable if you happened to tell him you were riding to Avonsbury in consequence of that doctrine.”

CHAPTER XXVIII

AT Avonsbury they were told that the priest lived in Diana's House and clearly expected to require no further enlightenment.

"And where does Diana live?" Basil asked in a matter-of-fact manner that seemed to strike the two boys of whom they sought information, as offensive. One of them picked up a stone as big as an egg and, having lubricated it, and rubbed it on his corduroys, corked himself with it, as a hint that he had nothing further to say. The other boy, after surveying Consuelo with an unbiassed air, said severely:

"He don't live nowheres."

"Dead?"

The boy nodded; but the other boy uncorked himself and said sharply:

"How do you know? You niver seed un. Nor heered on un. It's lies, Master; there aren't no Dianas in these parts."

"Where's the house they used to live in?" Basil enquired with bland persistence.

"Where the priest lives?"

"Yes."

"By the river, as you goes to the 'Engist Stone not as you goes *to* 'Engist Stone."

"I expect," said Basil to Consuelo with real brilliance of perception, "there's an inn called The Hengist Stone, and it isn't on the road that leads to Hengistone itself."

"That's right," observed the once-corked boy, who

could apparently understand any remark not addressed to himself.

"The 'Engist Stone be a Inn, where you gets down to 'ave a drink."

Conscious, apparently, of having pushed condescension far enough, the boy re-corked himself and put his hands in his pockets to intimate the finality of his action.

"And how," enquired Basil of the still available boy, "would you go to The Hengist Stone?"

"'Tis drunk on the premusses," retorted the boy scornfully. "You can't fotch it in a jug: and it's better nor a mile beyond the village. *I* don't go there."

"You've never been to Diana's House?"

"I've passed it."

"*That's* a lie!" yelled the other boy, tearing his hands out of his pockets and gouging the stone out of his mouth. "You've *bin* there: you didn't past it when you took the letter yore feather had forgot. Did you? 'Is feather's the postman, Master. And he's *bin* there. 'Tis round the other street past the George and then round again by the 'ouse with the parrot in the winder where Missis Blatch do live what had a son drowned in the Navy and *anyone'd* tell ye where Diana's House is. *I'll* show yer."

Some liquors never betray any inclination to bubble out till they have been corked down: this boy's spirit seemed akin to them. He butted forward with his head, to indicate the route to be followed, and started off himself at a hand gallop.

"You trot!" he bade the equestrians. "You've no call to walk along o' *me*. *I'll* keep up, you see. My feather's got a wooden leg: *he's* not postman. He was a sergeant, he were, and his leg was shot oft at Seringapatam; that's where *his* leg were shot oft, not at this las' battle. My feather don't make no count of Bony

Party; Tippoo was crueller nor *he*. My feather's a liar else. He keeps school now, *my* feather do, and he don't teach the boys nothing about Waterloo. Giv 'im battles with no Prooshans in 'em. That's Missis Blatch's, and there's her parrot swearing upsy down. In Hindoostany. My feather knows what he says: and Mrs. Blatch she thinks it's Indian for 'God Save King George' and 'Polly's got a sweet'art.' Her 'air takes off, Mrs. Blatch's do, I seen it on the lookin'-glasst when I was cleanin' winders. My feather leathered me when I told him, wi' his leg. That's Kent Lodge, that is. But Kent ain't there now. The keeper lives in it, and *his* wife had three twins at onst and got three guineas for it from the King, but she wouldn't do it again, nor more wouldn't I when I jumped over ten boys on their backs and that other boy, what told you he'd niver been to Diana's House said I *couldn't*. There's Diana's 'Ouse down there by the bridge: that's where the priest lives and he has the key o' the nuns' cages o'er his chimley-piece. But that *other* boy niver seen it though he bin there. . . ."

Basil gave the boy, whom he thereafter called Seringapatam, half a crown, which caused him to lose the breath he had miraculously *not* lost hitherto. He could only express his gratitude and low estimation of the donor's capacity to manage his own money matters, by instantly standing on his head against the high flint wall behind which the tall octagon of Diana's House peered like a watch-tower.

"You go in," said Basil to Consuelo when he had pulled at a bell-handle hanging outside a postern in the wall. "I'll look after the horses and make that boy stand right way up again."

Seringapatam hastily forestalled him.

"You leave *me* alone, Master," he cried as threateningly as was compatible with keeping the halfcrown in

his mouth. "And I'll leave *you* alone. Ben't you go in alonger your missis? P'r'aps the priest'll lock her up in one o' the cages else. And she'll get nowt but cabbitch to eat till she dies and they send her bones to the Pope to mek beads on. They don't worship nothin' but beads in their religion. My feather's a liar else, and *he* ain't postman . . . I'll look arter the 'orses, nor I won't gie 'em nettles to eat, I won't. 'Twasn't me given' Mrs. Blatch's pony sting-nettles to eat as made her kick and fotch'd the cork out, 'twas along o' me telling her as Zeb Mould 'ad *two* glass eyes else he'd niver walk out wi' she. You trusten *me* wi' they 'orses and I'll do nowt to werrit 'em, you take the 'arf-crowned back and don't gie 't me agin else."

He reproduced the coin, dried it on his cheek, aired it by a wave or two in the sun, and finally tendered it, as a pledge of good faith, to Basil.

"No, you keep it. If you *do* play any tricks I'll borrow your feather's wooden-leg and write my name on your back."

"He don't lend his leg, *he* don't," Seringapatam asserted undismayed. "He wouldn't lend it to Missis Billett to go to her daughter's weddin' in, as broke her knee on the slide, *not* the slide *I* made, 'tweren't my slide as *she* slipped up on. Why doncher go in alonger your missus? Whoa thin! My front foot's no bigger nor the ro-ad, keep yourn off will 'ee?"

"Do you think we shall find them there when we come out?" Consuelo asked cheerfully as they obeyed the silent invitation of the priest's housekeeper to walk in.

"Seringapatam," declared Basil confidently, "is the soul of honour. They may walk about on him to some extent and he won't mind. But he despises *me*."

"Because you gave him half a crown."

"He was cheap at the money."

"You never remunerate Lady Caradoc."

"Their style is similar: but his powers are more sustained. I wonder who she really *was*."

DIANA'S HOUSE was inscribed in tall letters on a stone slab over the door of the priest's many-sided dwelling and Basil and Consuelo were simultaneously reading the announcement.

"Who *was* Diana?" he demanded of their conductor.

"Plait-il, Monsieur?"

The priest's housekeeper, who was elderly and may really have been a sweet-tempered person, had a singular gift of expressing indifference in a few syllables.

Basil pointed with his whip to the inscription.

"Qu'est-ce que c' était cette Diana?" he enquired. The priest's housekeeper refused to look whither the whip pointed and said with dignity:

"Je n'en sais rien, M'sieur. Madame désire voir M. l'Aumonier?"

Madame admitted it, though the housekeeper had the air of expecting her to go back on her word.

"Alors!" she said, opening the door and leading M. l'Aumonier's visitors up a winding stone stair.

"Voilà! Quelqu' gens qui desirent quelqu' chose," she announced when a twist of the stairs landed them at an open door.

The priest sat within saying his office out of a breviary with worn corners to the pages, and he immediately rose and came forward to bid them enter. The housekeeper, relieved of responsibility, went downstairs again. She did not really think the lady and gentleman were beggars, though her manner suggested it. But their horses and their general appearance struck her as merely worldly and she disapproved of them. If they did not want to beg, what had they come for, with their fidgety horses, just as she was mixing an omelette and entreating St. Joseph to make it just as

light with two eggs as if she had left out the milk and put three into it? If it turned out flabby, it would not be her fault nor St. Joseph's, though he had failed her before when she upset the pot-au-feu and requested him to make a quart of water with half a sheep's head and nineteen onions in it taste the same. That had irritated her; for the nineteenth of March is his feast as everybody knows and they were big onions, and she had left the tongue in the half head, though sorely tempted to reserve it for separate use as a white entrée on the morrow when there would be no meat at all except a cutlet that had not kept as fresh as it should have done.

"I so seldom have visitors who need announcing that Josephine forgets her *etiquettes*," the priest said, greeting them with a smile, and leading them to chairs. Consuelo told him her name and Basil's and their host said that his was Ryan.

"Josephine pronounces it *Riant* and is tempted, I suspect, to think it a nickname; she never laughs herself and can't understand why I should."

It was true that he had a laughing manner, and was more boyish than Basil in his youngest moments. He was, perhaps, six or seven and twenty, but seemed much younger. His face was beautiful, and its exquisite expressions would have made it so even without the perfect features and deep Irish blue eyes. He had the profile of a Greek medal, his hair was of a bright chestnut brown, though the eyebrows were much darker, and the long lashes darker still. It was probably the boyish freshness and delicate texture of his skin that made him look like a mere youth.

"I am glad you are not French," Basil said. "I talk French very badly."

"Well, I talk it pretty fluently. That is the chief reason why I am here, as the nuns must have a chaplain who can. They are all French — except one; I was

brought up at the Irish College in Paris where King James II is buried."

It was a pleasure to Basil simply to hear him speak, no matter what he said. He had a beautiful voice, and his lips looked as if nothing mean or common could ever have been uttered by them.

"You are riding, I see," the priest went on. "Have you come far?"

"Only from Summer Avon," Consuelo told him. "My uncle, Mr. Dauntsey, lives there and I am staying in his house — so is Mr. Hungerford, though he lives further off, at Dace Court."

"I am not a Catholic," Basil explained; perhaps the priest thought unnecessarily, for he laughed in his light-hearted fashion and said:

"Your misfortune, not your fault!"

"I am not a Catholic either," Consuelo began: she was not looking at Basil and did not see how greatly she had surprised him. "But I was brought up among Catholics and my mother was one. I have come over to ask if you would say some Masses for an intention of mine."

"You talk like a Catholic anyway," said the priest. "Do you believe in the Holy Mass then?"

"Of course," Consuelo answered with a sort of surprise at his question. "I was at school in the Convent of Orsoline at Palermo, and went to Mass every day with the others."

"And did you learn Catechism with them?"

"Oh, yes. How else was I to learn any religion?"

The young priest laughed again.

"I have no objection," he said, "if your father had none. I hope he knew."

"My father? Oh, yes, he knew that I learned exactly what the other children did: my cousins, my mother's nieces, were at the same Convent, and he would

have thought it odd if I did not know as much as they did."

The priest laughed once more, he seemed to think Consuelo's father must have been an original person. Basil joined in his laugh and said:

"I always thought Donna Consuelo was a Catholic till I heard her tell you she wasn't. I believe her uncle and aunts think so at this moment."

"Do you? But I go to Church with them."

"Do you like it — going to Church I mean?" asked the priest, evidently still amused.

"I don't understand it much, it's all in English," Consuelo replied simply. "And the clergyman has no teeth, so he does not read well, and he is always in a hurry, for he comes some distance and it seems he only gets ten shillings for it. He has a great many children and ten shillings isn't much, is it?"

"Poor man, no," agreed the priest, laughing still. "But Mr. Hungerford calls you Donna Consuelo. That sounds a very Catholic name. Spanish, eh?"

Consuelo told him it was her mother's name, and added:

"People called me Donna Consuelo in Sicily and now Mr. Hungerford does so because there are two other Miss Dauntseys. . . . Will you please say the Masses for me? They are for a soul in Purgatory."

"Of course I will say them. Purgatory, too!"

And once more he justified Josephine's suspicion that he was called *Riant* from his habitual indulgence in the unnecessary process of laughing. People who laugh much are apt to seem rather silly, but no one who looked at Josephine's master could have suspected him of being so. His broad clear brow, and every line of his face expressed intellect: his laughter was the bubbling out of a clear and happy spirit.

When people ask to have Masses said for any par-

ticular "invention" of their own it is usual to make an offering, the Church's immemorial compliance with St. Paul's dictum that they who minister at the Altar must live by the Altar: and Consuelo had her offering ready.

"Christmas Eve is the anniversary," she said, as she tendered it, "and that is past. Just say them, as you can, as soon as possible."

Something in her matter-of-fact manner amused the priest again. Basil had been rather impressed by it. There can be few things more difficult than for a lady to hand money to a gentleman without the slightest awkwardness on either side.

CHAPTER XXIX

“Would you like to see the convent?” Mr. Ryan asked them presently.

It may as well be explained that the custom of giving the title “Father” to secular priests had not grown up in England at that date.

“How about the horses?” Consuelo suggested.

“Seringapatam will look after them,” Basil declared with unabated confidence.

“That is an odd name!” the young priest remarked.

“Have you a foreign groom?”

His visitors laughed and explained.

“Let us go and see how he has behaved,” said the priest — “I take Mr. Hungerford’s side, and with so much character as your boy possesses it would be a pity if most of it was not good.” As they went they passed the open door of Josephine’s kitchen.

“Doit-on servir le déjeuner?” she called out.

“Pas à present, nous allons au couvent.”

Seringapatam had justified Basil’s confidence. He was still there and so were the horses, who had evidently sustained no injury. But the sight of the priest appeared to reduce him to his original taciturnity.

“Would it not be best for you and Miss Dauntsey to ride round?” Mr. Ryan suggested. “And I can go across the park and meet you. I shall be there as soon as you.”

“Will you go with that gentleman to be ready to hold the horses again?” Basil asked of the inattentive-looking but eagerly listening boy.

Seringapatam replied with valour.

"I aren't afraid, I aren't," he muttered in Basil's ear.
"I'll go along o' he if he'll show me the key."

But the priest had quick ears.

"What key?" he asked with cheerful interest.

"The key o'er the chimley-piece."

"There *isn't* any key over the chimney-piece."

Seringapatam knew better.

"I don't tell lies," he observed with a withering sniff.

"My father ain't postman. Without he shows me the key I shan't go alonger he."

Basil was laughing: the priest was quite ready to laugh as soon as he had any opportunity. Basil thought it a pity not to afford one.

"Seringapatam wants to see the key with which you lock the nuns into their cages. He understands it to hang over your chimney-piece."

"I'll show him the chimney-piece: there's a rod over it," the priest observed obligingly.

Seringapatam nodded darkly. He could easily guess for whom the rod was kept. Perhaps, on the whole, it would be better worth seeing than the key: especially if it should prove to have stains on it. *He* knew what sort of stains. He recovered animation. The reappearance of Basil and Consuelo intact had slightly disconcerted him. He would like to have something to tell his father as a set-off against Tippoo Sahib.

"I'll go," he declared with the air of a soldier's son who feared nothing.

Basil and Consuelo mounted their steeds and rode off.

"Simply keep along the wall," their host instructed them, "and turn to the right at the end of it where the houses begin, then straight on till you come to the Abbey Lodge, immediately beyond the church."

"Now," he said when they were gone: and he turned towards the still open postern door in the wall.

Without witnesses Seringapatam felt less valiant: but

he would not show it. He walked beside the priest with the air of one who was not to be trifled with. It was disappointing to see that the priest kept poultry, of the tame and prosaic breed to which he was accustomed. One of the hens had even laid an egg, and was announcing the achievement in the familiar manner.

"She's making a good deal of noise about a smallish matter," the priest remarked carelessly. "But, after all, she has *something* to go on. She *has* laid an egg."

"They never goes on a' that'n," Seringapatam observed, "unless they has laid one."

"Exactly. Though fussy, they are truthful."

Seringapatam perceived dimly that the priest was laughing at him for something, and resented it.

"Doit-on servir, alors?" Josephine demanded again, showing herself at the door of her kitchen.

"Pas encore, nous allons au couvent."

Josephine was disgusted, and showed it. With a glance of undisguised disapproval at Seringapatam she went back into her kitchen; she belonged to the numerous class of elderly females who dislike boys on principle till they find reason to the contrary. Seringapatam had, she felt sure, made faces at her when she went forth into the village to buy meat. He was, in fact, making them now, to assert himself, though no one could see them, as he followed the priest upstairs. The queer, octagonal house, the winding stone stairs, and the foreign tongue in which its inhabitants had exchanged remarks, were quite as they should be. He really felt a glow of pride in his own intrepidity.

The priest's little sitting-room, in spite of its odd shape, was an anti-climax.

"There!" said the young man, pointing to the chimney-piece. "There's the rod."

Seringapatam looked, and felt himself defrauded.

"It's a fishing-rod," he said, "a good un in four pieces. And brass j'int's. That is."

"I'm sorry," observed the priest courteously, "it is not precisely the sort of rod to which you are most accustomed. I caught a two-pound trout with it last time I used it. Last time you saw a rod I expect *you* caught it."

Seringapatam's face, and his attitude, as he stood on one foot and stared at the rod, made the young man burst out again into one of his irresistable peals of laughter.

"Come!" he said, "we must be off, or the lady and gentleman will get to the Abbey before us: and there'll be no one to hold the horses."

He led the way downstairs once more and took the boy across the park. Seringapatam had never been there and looked about him with furtive interest.

"Did 'ee cotch the two pun' trout down there?" he suddenly demanded, butting with his head in the direction of the river.

"Yes, I've caught a lot just where you're looking. I'd show you the place, only we must be quick, or Mr. Hungerford and Miss Dauntsey will be there before us."

"She's not he's missis, then, the young lady isn't?"

"No."

"Nor yet," this with defiance, "that woman isn't *your* Missis as was clattering the saucepans while you and me went upstairs. She's too old. And . . ."

"And what?"

"*She* ain't a lady, she ain't."

"Priests don't get married."

Seringapatam was favourably impressed. It appeared to him that having to get married was about the worst consequence of being grown up. He wondered if his father would have got married had he been aware that by becoming a priest the necessity might be avoided.

Mrs. Seringapatam was apt to remove her husband's wooden leg and hide it when she suspected him of intending an evening visit to the Queensbury or the George.

"You're not the other priest as was 'ere a while gone," he observed lucidly. "*He* was crippled, he was, and had white 'air. He couldn't talk plain, he couldn't. Not like you. He didn't catch trout, *I* lay he didn't. 'Twas 'im as 'ad the key o'er the chimney-piece, *I* know."

The young man laid a very strong, if quite gentle, hand on the boy's head, and forced him to look up.

"You don't *want* to tell lies, do you?" he demanded simply.

"I don't tell lies," Seringapatam began. "My father . . ."

"I know about your father. The gentleman told me. He was a sergeant, and lost his leg at the battle of Seringapatam. *My* father was killed there, on the 3rd. of May, 1799."

The boy was more impressed than he found convenient: to be killed is undeniably more striking than to have one leg shot off.

"If your feather was killed," he urged, unwilling to be overborne without a stand for it, "how come he to get married arter?"

"He was married before, *my* father was," the priest explained with a slight parody of the boy's favourite form of emphasis. "The storming of Seringapatam was only twenty years ago last May. He was married ten years before that; you see, I am twenty-seven years old."

"Was your father an officer?" Seringapatam had heard *his* father say that more officers than men, in proportion, had been killed.

"No," the young man replied simply. "He was a private soldier."

Seringapatam was at once relieved and disappointed. An officer he had learned to regard as a being of elevation so aloof that it might have been an uncomfortable tax on his resources to know how to bear himself with the son of one. Nevertheless, he was an English boy, and unconsciously resented the problem involved in the son of a private soldier being evidently a gentleman. He had never doubted that the young priest *was* a gentleman, and was not in the least tempted to change his mind now.

Anyway, the priest was able to catch two-pound trout, had a soldier for his father, and was clearly as strong as a horse. Not being a logical person, Seringapatam was inclined to believe that the last circumstance alone would have thrown doubt on the locking-up story, as also on his own hastily imagined theory as to the rod over the chimney-piece. The old crippled priest who could hardly get along on two sticks would have been far more likely to indulge in such pastimes.

"And now, Seringapatam . . ."

"That ain't my name. My name's Ephy Musprat," objected the boy.

"Ephraim Musprat was the name of a man whose life *my* father saved," the priest said. "How little the world is! Well, Ephy (Seringapatam is what the gentleman calls you) . . ."

"What guv me arf a crownd?"

The priest nodded.

"Well, Ephy; you listen. Your father doesn't let you tell lies . . ."

"He'd leather me for it. *He* would." Seringapatam was obviously prouder of the dire consequences of a detected attempt at falsehood than of any disinclination of his own to mendacity.

"And you're telling lies," the priest insisted, "when you talk of keys hung up over chimney-pieces to lock

nuns into cages with: say it again if you like, only you'll know when you do, that you are telling lies behind the backs of ladies who can't speak up for themselves. That's all."

There was something so disagreeable in the finality of the "That's all" that Seringapatam was quite cowed by it. What made it worse was the extreme gentleness with which it was spoken. And the boy detected also a sadness in the tone used by the young man at his side. He had heard him laughing with Consuelo and Basil as they came out to look for the horses: he had also perceived instantly that when the half-crown gentleman had told the priest about the key over the chimney-piece, he had meant the latter to laugh again, whereas no laugh had been forthcoming, only a slight flush, and the same rather sad look his face bore now.

Seringapatam walked on in some discomfort: he gathered that in the event of persistence in his story about the locking up he would figure in the young priest's eyes as a mean person. He objected to be thought mean, and he already liked the man who seemed conditionally resolved to regard him in that offensive light. A loophole of comfort, however, offered itself.

"Yes: but," he said presently, "it ain't behind them *ladies'* backs: not unless I was to say they locked *themselves* up."

His companion saw the point at once — which grown-up people, Seringapatam considered, are habitually slow to do.

"You mean that if you told lies against anybody it would be against *me*? All right; tell them against me. Only you'll still know what you're doing. For there's *no* locking up."

The boy found his loophole blocked up. For choice, he would dislike being mean at his companion's expense more than incurring that stigma at the expense of the

nuns, who were only women, and personally unknown to him.

"Well," he said slowly, and not without reluctance, "I'll knock off telling aught about locking up. I didn't mean no 'arm nuther."

This time the priest did laugh. It is hard for one whose life and soul is in his religion to be reminded of misrepresentation and silly calumnies against it: but he could see very well that Seringapatam himself *had* meant no harm. The idea of the locking up in cages was abandoned by him with an effort, not because he enjoyed being calumnious, but because the story seemed to him interesting and uncommon. Seringapatam, in fact, would not have thought very badly of the priest (now that he knew him), if he *had* practised the discipline in question. Perhaps some of the nuns might be none the worse for it. Had it been occasionally possible for Mrs. Seringapatam to be locked up, her son would have thought the arrangement convenient, and was disposed to think his father would have benefited. He was not an unnatural son, and was alive to his mother's good points, which were often vanishing points, but he liked his father best, and could not be blind to the fact that, when all was said and done, Mrs. Seringapatam was a woman. He knew that his father, with not unreasonable frequency, "took a drop," a circumstance inherent, as he supposed, in being a grown man: but his mother made too much "quack" about it.

When the priest laughed the boy knew that terms of amity were being proclaimed.

"There they am," he observed cheerfully. "And I'll do they ones ag'in."

CHAPTER XXX

THE nun's chaplain had asked his visitors whether they would like to see the convent, for so it was, of course, spoken of by him, and its present inhabitants; but it was a convent only in the sense that nuns lived in it. The original abbey had long disappeared, and the existing house was a Palladian mansion with a tall portico. It was only rented by the sisters, and they intended, as their lease was nearly out, and the Bourbon monarchy restored in France, to return soon to their own country. No structural alterations had been made even indoors: the saloon was fitted up as their chapel; the drawing-room, opening out of it at one end, was their community-room, and the dining-room was their refectory. All these rooms were on the first floor: the bedrooms on that and the second floor were their "cells": on the ground floor, to right and left of the entrance hall, had been a billiard-room and a picture-room, of which one was now used as a sort of sacristy by the chaplain, the other as the parlour. The inner hall, reaching up to the lanterned roof, was screened off by a temporary wooden grille, which indicated the enclosure: a stone corridor led from it to a second door in the former billiard-room, across which also an open grille of light woodwork was run. The house was large, with side wings, and had a cheerful air, being built of white stone.

To the portico over the entrance a temporary wooden staircase ran up outside, and the priest led his visitors up this and so into the "extern" portion of the chapel: across the lower end of the long room furthest from the altar another grille screened off the nun's choir, where at

that moment they were singing the short office of None.

As a light curtain was hung on their side of the screen they were invisible, but from the sound of their voices one would say there would be about twenty of them, and also that they were sitting on the floor. These nuns use no chairs, and in their cells have only a stool by way of table to write upon. The altar at the opposite end of the temporary chapel was not very beautiful, a wooden one, of a poor French design, pseudo-classical, painted white, and decorated with gilding. But it did not harmonize badly with the room, which was decorated in white and gold also: the ceiling, however, was painted by an Italian artist with an allegorical representation of an event which never took place — the apotheosis of the ducal patron of the designer. The doors of the room were perhaps the finest things about it, being of well-polished chestnut, and having richly carved lintels and frames: the tall chimney-piece of marble, bronze, and bronze-gilt was also worthy of the noble room.

The nuns sang their office without accompaniment, and their method of singing was strange to the ears, for their rule allowed them the use of only two notes.

Consuelo and the priest genuflected to the altar, and knelt down: Basil knelt behind them, and watched them pray. He did not use his own formulas of prayer, having a feeling that it would be unfair in a place peculiarly consecrated to another use.

In Buddhism there are monks and nuns, and he, therefore, had none of the repugnance or hostility that a Protestant of his day might have felt on finding himself where he was. But he had never seen any Buddhistic nuns, nor even met a mendicant wandering monk of the saffron robe. So he was the more interested.

And then this was Consuelo's religion. True, she had surprised him by saying she was not a Catholic: but he

understood by that merely that her father had caused her to be baptized according to the Protestant formula, and had intimated that she was to be regarded officially as a Protestant: he had allowed her to be brought up by Catholic nuns, and to learn the religion the nuns taught: she knew no other. He was sure that by every tie of training, sympathy, association and lifelong habit she was a Catholic. Wide as is the difference between Christian monasteries and Buddhist, he was able to appreciate the Catholic idea and motive. He was not disposed to ridicule these nuns as idiots, or to indulge in a raging pity for them as victims. At all events, their life was one of attenuation of those material chains wherewith the unenlightened love to bind themselves more and more closely to the lower existence of matter, its pleasures, and its business.

He listened to the thin singing, with scarcely even cadence to make it claim to be music, and recognized in it a symbol of impregnable sincerity. These nuns believed, and were willing to stake everything on their belief. To them, he knew, this life was *really* a light and slight thing except as preface to the true type of which it was but the hint and shadow. He was not himself so mean or so material as to suppose they must be miserable: what misery in making haste to get as fit as may be for unimaginable bliss? Of course, he knew the Christian picture of heaven; and he knew, too, that such a heaven would be intolerable to millions of Christians who professed to be looking forward to it: a purely spiritual existence, how could it be borne by people to whom every purely spiritual idea was a bugbear and almost a scandal? At its best, he thought the Christianity he had seen was materially philanthropic, in most of its nominal professors merely self-indulgent. To die, as they called it, would be to these nuns merely stepping into the next room. He knew pretty well from books

the Christian modes of expression — these nuns, he told himself, when they crossed the river into the undiscovered country, would not find themselves in a land of embarrassing strangeness, from whose ideas of happiness they were averse, whose speech was alien, and whose Sovereign had enunciated principles they had always contravened or explained away.

Basil was not frightened of the bugbear so clamorously raised against monachism — “what if all mankind adopted it?” Mankind was not in the least danger. In no age have men and women betrayed the slightest proclivity to giving up too much. The hold of this world, of its interests and its pleasures, has never been so precarious as to alarm economists. And Basil did not care a jot for political economy. If all mankind did rush into monachism, and so ceased, he would say that the climax was not one to shrink from. A catastrophe may be more noble than mere continuance.

Nevertheless, an unwelcome thought suggested itself — what if Consuelo should one day feel called to this life? He knew that he shrank from the idea, and he knew why. That she should do so would not be unworthy of her: he ought not to be unwilling that she should do what seemed to her the highest thing, and he did not try to juggle with truth by telling himself that he desired for her a career of “higher usefulness.” He was not a utilitarian, and he knew of no particular line of altruistic service to which, even if she wished, she could devote herself: nor did he believe she had any drawing to such a life. His reluctance to think of her as seated on the floor behind that grille and curtain among the nuns at the back of the long room was, he was conscious, not on her account, but on his own — the “Red Mist,” he sighed to himself. He remembered how he had become aware of having had a sort of jealousy of Caradoc, and he smiled a little as he confessed

that he would certainly rather think of her here, as a nun, than with her life linked to that pragmatistical coxcomb. He could smile because he was sure there was no such danger: then in front of Caradoc another figure arose in his memory, which arrived there, he felt, illogically. What had Hurdcott to do with it all?

The office of None is very short, and the nuns' singing was over five minutes after their chaplain and his visitors had entered the chapel. There was a brief pause of total silence, then the sound of the sisters rising from the floor, and moving away out of the chapel: in a low voice, almost like a whisper, they recited something as they went out.

The young priest rose from his knees, and led Basil and Consuelo out of the chapel and down the wooden stair to the entrance, where he rang. Presently a lay sister opened the door, and the chaplain told her that he wished to take his visitors to the parlour, and asked her to tell Mère Prioure.

"I know," he said, "that it is dinner-time in quarter of an hour. We will not keep her long."

The lay sister seemed glad to see them, and smiled hospitably as she took them across the white hall to the large parlour. She was a stoutish, comfortable person, about fifty years old, with the air of a prosperous French peasant woman.

The temporary parlour was a large, rather low, room, cut in two by the wooden grille behind which, on a rod a foot or so from it, hung a green baize curtain. A row of stiff wooden chairs stood against the wall under the windows, which had no curtains, and the young priest brought forward three of them to the grille, and invited his visitors to sit down.

Basil looked about him: on the walls there were the sort of marks that pictures leave, and the nails from which the pictures had hung.

"I am trying," he said, "to reconstruct this room with Duchess Kitty here. I daresay portraits of Gay and Prior hung on those nails once."

The chaplain told him it had been the billiard-room.

"Perhaps Mr. Gay read aloud the Beggars' Opera here while His Grace played billiards," surmised Basil.

Behind the grille the door opened, and someone came in.

She made very little sound, for the floor was of white marble, and she wore only straw sandals on her bare feet: but they could hear her sit down on the pavement, and immediately a very young voice said:

"May the Child Jesus bring you all happiness and grace."

Almost instantly the voice added, "I did not keep you waiting this time, M. l'Abbé. The soeur Tourriere caught me as I was coming out of chapel, and I came at once."

She laughed as she said this, and the chaplain laughed, too, explaining to his guests that she was generally a long time coming to the parlour.

"It is the proper thing," he declared. "She does it to make one believe she doesn't want to come."

"Or else that I am busy. M. l'Abbé cannot believe that nuns ever have anything to do."

"You have your dinner to eat in a few minutes," he said, "and so I shall not keep you long. They only have one meal a day," he added to Basil, "and so I leave you to guess if they are ready for it—I suppose you have the rest of the Christmas Turkey to eat up," he concluded, to the invisible nun behind the curtain.

This was a little joke, as the nuns never ate meat, and only used eggs on great festivals.

"We sent you the turkey," the hidden voice retorted. "We only made him lay us a few eggs first. I hope

Josephine did not burn him this time. Last year she made him into cinders, and our poor aumonier had to remind her of the difference between Christmas and Ash Wednesday."

"That was Monsieur Tourzel; I should not dare to remind Josephine of anything. All this time I have not introduced my visitors." The young priest told their names, and added:

"They both declare they are not Catholics, but they are come to get Masses said to get a soul out of Purgatory!"

The cheerful voice behind the grille observed that Protestant souls in Purgatory might need a little help to get out as much as anybody.

"There are no Protestants in Purgatory — or in the other place," the priest declared, with one of his boyish laughs. "By that time they know better!"

"Mademoiselle and Monsieur will think," the Prioress protested, "that we are frivolous persons who do nothing but laugh."

"I was brought up in a Convent," Consuelo said, "and I know all about it."

"Ah! You know the worst of us! Where was your Convent, then?"

Consuelo told her, and the nun said:

"Our little sister Lucie is from Sicily. I will send for her; she would like to talk to you in Italian."

But the priest would not hear of it.

"No. In three minutes it is your dinner-time: Miss Dauntsey must come over again: it will be the best way to make her — we must keep an inducement up our sleeve."

"That is a good idea," agreed the Prioress. "On that understanding I will be obedient."

A bell began to ring, and the priest at once rose from his chair, his visitors following his example.

"Go and eat, my dear sister," he said; "I shall not wish you a good appetite, it must be there already."

"Bless me, please," begged the happy voice behind the grille, and they could hear the speaker kneel *up*, for it was not kneeling *down*, as she asked it.

Consuelo was too much used to it to be struck; it was only in her case a reminder of old scenes long familiar, and now fallen into her young past. Basil could not help being struck by the simplicity with which the unseen nun made her little request, and with which the priest complied. The echo of his kindly laugh was still in his voice as he gave the blessing.

"Au revoir, Mademoiselle and Monsieur. Come again now you have learned the way."

This time the nun was standing up. They returned her farewell, and heard the door behind the grille open as she passed out.

"How young she sounds!" observed Basil, when the door had closed. "Younger almost than you!"

His voice, as he turned to the priest, was full of affection, not as if he were speaking to a man he had met for the first time an hour ago. He had always felt rather young himself, but the nuns' chaplain seemed to him like a delightful huge boy.

"Oh, I daresay she is old enough to be my mother," the priest answered. "But one doesn't ask ladies their ages, nuns or no nuns."

He led them out of the parlour, and they found the stout portress waiting by the outer door. She immediately dived down, and demanded a blessing, too.

"It's the only thing they ever ask," the chaplain observed cheerfully, "and it's all I have to give."

"And a little prayer, please, M. l'Abbé," the lay sister begged, rising to the surface smilingly. "I have a little intention, please remember it in your Mass."

"As it's only a little one, I will." The priest prom-

ised, and the portress opened the door. They passed out, raked by her nods and smiles of good will. She stood still in the doorway to see the last of them, while the dinner-bell gave a final bang or two, and held its tongue.

"Will you now come and share my déjeuner?" the young priest asked his visitors. "I'm afraid it will not have much to recommend it except the sauce of Welcome."

"Is that Josephine's *chef d'œuvre*?" Basil enquired innocently.

Their host laughed aloud:

"Well, no. The sauce will be of my providing."

Basil left it to Consuelo to reply to the invitation they had received, and she declined it, not out of fear of Josephine, but because she did not want to leave the chaplain with nothing to eat himself. Besides, she thought their visit had been long enough.

As they mounted, the priest looked admiringly at their horses.

"I am sure you ride," said Basil.

"Every Irishman rides," replied the chaplain. "But nuns do not keep a stud of horses even for their aumonier."

"Well, I shall come over again, one morning early, and bring a horse for you to ride back with me: and Donna Consuelo and her aunts shall come to my house to meet you, and we will lunch together, after all. I must go home to-morrow; she is not so hospitable as her aunts, and thinks I have overstayed my invitation."

The young priest promised very readily: and he and Seringapatam stood waiting to see the two equestrians ride away.

"Good-bye," Consuelo said to the boy; "it's my turn now," and she bent down to put something into his hand.

"Naw! *He* guv me arf a crownd, and it's all the job," Seringapatam declared fiercely. Basil and the priest turned away amused eyes: Consuelo stooped again towards the refractory boy and said something they could not hear. But Seringapatam had to look up and meet the girl's eyes with his own. Then Basil and Consuelo rode away.

"I am glad you did not hurt that lady's feelings," the priest observed.

"I don't care for girls," Seringapatam declared with a red face, "in general."

CHAPTER XXXI

As they rode homewards over the still, sunlit downs Basil felt himself full of cheerfulness.

"That priest and those nuns," he said, "have a buoyant effect on one."

"Do you mean boyish?" asked Consuelo, laughing.

"Boyish, if you like, though it's a horrible habit to make puns. Girlish, as well. For you're ten years younger than when we started."

"Then I'm only nine years old!"

Basil yielded the point. Nine years old, he felt, was more than he aimed at.

Presently he told her frankly how much she had surprised him by saying she was not a Catholic.

"All the same, you are one," he added confidently.

"Do Catholics marry non-Catholics?"

"Well, my mother married my father," she reminded him.

"Does it run in families?"

"Not in mine. It never happened before."

"I wasn't thinking so much of the past. It seems a good precedent."

"I don't know. Let's have a gallop on this flat piece."

She flicked up her horse, and they did canter till an undeniable hill brought them up.

"Would *you* marry a man who was not a Catholic?" Basil enquired, with an engaging air of generalizing.

"That," Consuelo replied, "would depend on the Protestant."

"Oh! he need not be exactly a Protestant," Basil exclaimed quite eagerly, with a quick recollection of Mr. Caradoc. "Protestants are not the only non-Catholics."

"You are suggesting an engaging Turk. The case is too hypothetical: I used to buy walking-sticks, of ebony inlaid with silver, for presents for my father, from a Turk at Palermo: but my father got tired of walking-sticks, and the Turk never proposed to me."

"He was a silly Turk. Perhaps he was blind, though."

"No. But I believe he had four wives at Broussa, where his home was. He . . ."

"Let us waive the Turk. I was not actually thinking of Mussulmans. How about Buddhists?"

Consuelo did not again flick up her horse and break into a canter: she went to the other extreme, and pulled up altogether, but the effect was analogous.

"*Must* we be tiresome!" she demanded, with a voice full of protest.

"You needn't be tiresome, if you don't like."

"Well, you began it," she declared. "It was all so nice before, why shouldn't it go on? Seringapatam would not behave like that: I can see that boy hates girls."

Basil did not for the moment desire the discussion of Seringapatam's peculiar merits.

"I don't care for *girls* any more than he does," he affirmed, with an emphasis not lost on his interlocutor.

"Shall we go on?" Consuelo asked cheerfully.

"I didn't stop. I *wanted* to go on," Basil observed, too significantly.

"I know. You were tiresome."

"You won't consider the Buddhist question?"

She thought he was badgering her, and grew restive.

"I hate the Red Mist," she said hard-heartedly.

Basil's face looked as if some reflexion of it had fallen on his cheeks.

"Look here," she went on, and as she spoke she made an effort to prevent her horse rubbing noses with his, which she had effectively prevented hitherto. "We have been such good friends: can't it go on?"

"I should like it to *go on ever so!*" he replied incautiously.

She began to pull her horse away, and he saw that it was no use. Fortunately he laughed: that saved the situation.

"We are quarreling like two children," she declared. He was thinking how she had said, "You began it."

"Children!" she cried: but she laughed, too, and he knew she was not going to be angry yet.

"Look here, Consuelo," he said, borrowing her late phrase, "I know I ought to let well alone: but do tell me this, is it the religion?"

She thought he *ought* to let well alone, but he had asked her a plain question, and to plain questions it was her nature to give plain answers.

"No, it isn't," she replied frankly and at once. "If all the Catholics in the world asked me I should say No."

He could not help laughing again, which proves he was not really in love.

"You would have to say No to a good many of them," he pointed out.

"I should say No to each of them one by one — no matter how long it took, or how hungry I was."

"You are thinking of your luncheon!"

"It's no use thinking of it: it's too far away."

"You won't think of *me*, anyway?"

"I don't want to think of you. I never do think of the people I'm with when they are nice. Do be nice. You can be. If you insist on saying something worry-

ing you'll have to go home directly we get in, and everything pleasant will have been spoiled."

He was, at all events, enough in love to concede a good deal for the sake of another four and twenty hours or less of her company.

"Then I won't say it. But . . ."

She was too much on the alertly defensive to ask, "But what?"

He went on without the excuse such a question would have given him.

"But . . . you say it is not the religion. Is it . . . is it that you do not like *me*, or is it . . . is it . . . somebody else?"

"You have given me," she told him, "a good pretext to be angry if I wanted one. I do not choose to be angry. Nor will I be rude. I like you very much, and that is just why I will not let you make me dislike you . . . I don't see what's the good of the Red Mist idea, if — if it doesn't prevent you behaving like a Christian."

He exploded into laughter, which may have been a healthy consequence of his recent contact with the nuns' chaplain.

"Do go on laughing," she begged; "if you laugh till we get home it will be all right. No one can do two things with their mouths at once."

They had been moving on slowly up the hill, and were on flat ground again, and now she made her horse perceive that another canter was "indicated."

When they drew rein the villages of Summer Avon lay in sight beneath them in the valley.

On their left, but some distance from the track they were following was a ruined wind-mill.

"It's odd," he observed, seeing her eyes turned that way, "how few wind-mills there are on the plain. There is wind enough in all conscience and corn enough."

She saw he was not going to begin again and was grateful. She instantly reverted to the *status quo ante*, and bore no malice.

"I don't like your wind-mill," she said, eyeing it with a look of unmistakable aversion. "Do you remember the place you told me this morning had a wicked air about it? I think your wind-mill looks much worse."

"It isn't my wind-mill," he protested, laughing. "I'm not responsible."

Between them and it was a large patch of turnips, eaten down in squares where sheep had been folded: about three hundred sheep were folded now on a fresh patch less than half eaten. The shepherd was walking about outside with his uncouth, tangled dog keeping close to his heels.

They gazed beyond him to where the ruined mill stood in a bit of waste ground overgrown with long faded bents. A plot of garden belonging to two cottages, under one thatched roof, ran up to it: the roof wanted renewing, and was full of dark patches where it was almost worn through. From the front of the cottages a narrow lane, deep between high hedges and trees, ran down to the road in the river-valley.

The cottages had a poor, hangdog air of slouching poverty, and, as no smoke happened to rise from either of their chimneys, one could hardly tell at that distance whether they were inhabited. The doors were both shut, and there was no sign of life or occupation. They had once made one dwelling, where the miller lived.

The mill may have been burned out; it had a blackened look on one side, and no woodwork was left in the windows, one above the other, that marked where the different floors had once been. The walls, where not stained black, were of a weather-darkened gray. For a minute or so Consuelo and Basil sat still on their horses looking at the place.

"That looks like your friend with the romance behind him," Basil observed, as a young man came from behind the mill, the roof of which was on the other side.

Consuelo knew that he meant Hurdcott, and scarcely noticed that he had called him her friend. If she had she would only have thought he did not remember the odd name, which she had told him was not a name at all. Besides, Hurdcott was her friend.

"Yes, it is Hurdcott," she said at once. "No one else hereabouts walks like him."

"It is odd how badly English people walk. The peasant folk *don't* walk: they merely shovel themselves along. It is almost a physical beauty to move like that young man."

Hurdcott was two or three hundred yards from them, but Consuelo was quite able to recognize the truth of what Basil was saying.

"Yes," she said, "you are right. But he is walking quicker than usual and looking down. You would admire his way of walking more if he were not hurrying — and were holding his head up as he generally does."

She never spoke of the young man with the least restraint, but always with a kind of simple, frank interest. She liked him; and was sorry for him, scarcely understanding why: he seemed to her like a person who had lost his way in life. And then she knew that lies were told about him.

Hurdcott did not come their way, nor pass in front of the cottages, but jumped over a low hedge into a field, and so went down to the road, and was lost to sight. Even if he had seen them, and he had not seemed to look up once, he would not have come towards them: for he was always shy of obtruding himself.

Just as they were moving on, something made them look towards the mill again, and they saw a woman come

from behind it, just as Hurdcott had done. She pushed through a gap in the hedge between the bit of waste ground and the garden patch behind the cottages, and walked down it towards the back of one of them.

"It is queer how one can see things like that without hearing; that girl is laughing," Basil observed as they turned away.

"Yes," Consuelo said in a tone that made him first want to look at her, and then resolve not to. There are people, who call themselves our friends, to whom it is a pleasure and a diversion to catch on our faces expressions we grudge being there: but Basil was not one of them. The instinct of sympathy told him that something had troubled Consuelo. He did not want to surprise her face off-guard, nor to make up his mind what the annoyance or trouble was. An idea suggested itself to his quick intuition, but he would not let it loiter in his mind, though its flashing there he could not help. Perhaps Hurdcott and the young woman they had seen had just parted: so handsome a fellow, and one so different from the boorish farm-hands and labourers, was pretty sure to catch the eye and the fancy of village beauties, and young men are not at all afraid of the Red Mist. Yet Consuelo, with romantic notions as to Hurdcott being separated, in some vague, half-mysterious way, from the fustian interests of the village, might find it an unwelcome shock to have the fact of such love-making presented to her. Something, too, about the girl almost disappointed Basil himself in Hurdcott: a beauty she might be — it was too far off to know — but her air was not rustic. There was a townish flaunt that condemned her even at that distance. She was loudly vulgar.

And even at that distance Consuelo recognized Jocha, though she was now dressed out much more pretentiously than when they had met at Dogbury Rings.

Her swaggering walk, as she shook, almost flung, herself from side to side, was only more pronounced.

Consuelo had certainly hoped never to see the girl again, and had been lucky in having seldom thought of her. To see her now was a real shock. It was not possible that Hurdcott and she had not met, though Consuelo could urgently tell herself that the meeting may have been accidental, and to him simply repugnant.

CHAPTER XXXII

CONSUELO was quite right as to the meeting having been repugnant to Hurdcott, but it had not happened by chance. He had gone to the old mill in obedience to a mysteriously worded note from the girl, of whose return he was ignorant till he got it. She gave him to understand that she had come down from London on purpose to see him, and had something he *must* hear, to tell him. This was a mere lie: she had come home because her father had had a "seizure," and was lying, unconscious, in one of the two cottages near the ruined mill where he and her stepmother lived. Jocha had not decided on the comfortless winter journey out of filial tenderness or sentiment: she had a much more practical and characteristic motive, which she kept, however, to herself. Old Job Nadder had always been a miser, and, like other misers, had pretended to be very poor. He was fond of talking of his losses: how he *had* saved a trifle once, but had trusted it to a lawyer-chap in Chalkminster to "put out" for him, and had been cozened out of it all, besides having in some mysterious way given the legal gentleman some "handle on him" so that he had "charges" to meet from time to time. The present Mrs. Nadder thoroughly believed in the lawyer and the "charges," knowing no more of their nature than if they had been operations of cavalry: and she derived a gloomy satisfaction, and some sense of dignity, from the conviction (hotly deprecated by her husband), of the magnitude of the original sum lost by trusting to the diabolically clever solicitor. Undoubtedly, the

money itself would have been more agreeable, but, when you live in a poor cottage, with a bad roof and a "chimley that smokes like a Christian," it is flattering to feel that you have been cheated in so respectable a manner. 'Twas almost like the gentry.

Jocha was as little clever as her stepmother, but there is crafty stupidity and simple stupidity. Jocha had nothing simple about her, not even her ignorance. She had just the scheming, suspicious dullness that gets people of a low mental calibre into trouble.

She did not believe at all in the lawyer, or the "losses": whatever money her father had scraped together during fifty years or more of adult meanness and greed was safe enough somewhere.

The theme was so interesting that she had evolved more than one theory as to what her father had really done with his hoard. Perhaps he really had once "put it out" somehow; and the lawyer story had merely occurred to him, in a nervous moment of apprehension, and had then been adopted to make folks believe in his poverty. But it was more likely that he had the money within reach: she could not imagine he would bring himself to parting with the possibility of occasionally handling it and making love to it. She thought it was hidden somewhere about the house. This theory had received accidental confirmation not long before she left home to go to London.

One day she was tidying up the cottage, more to pass the time away than because she was specially fond of good order and tidiness. Her stepmother was out at work, doing a little "charring" somewhere: her father was also out, but he came in at the precise moment in which she took into her hands a certain china teapot, that was never used because it *was* china, but led a life of dignified idleness on the top of the tall dresser.

Jocha was standing on the dresser, and was about to

dust the teapot, which would have been none the worse for it.

"What 'ee doin' up there? Com' 'ee down, Madam!" Job cried from the open doorway with unconcealed exasperation.

"I were but gettin' the place straight a bit," retorted Jocha; "all of a caddle 'twere."

"Com' 'ee down, I say. Caddle or no caddle, I winnot 'ave thick tay-pot smashed. 'Twas you broke the nose off'n. 'Fore you was ole enough t' arn annything ye could brick things. Set un down, I bid 'ee."

Jocha had as much pleasure in being tiresome as if she had been a really clever person.

"Lard! How he do rattle," she observed, as she put the teapot back undusted. "If anybody didn't know better, they'd say 'twas money inside of un. 'Tis the spout, I expect. Shall I take the pieces out and stick 'em on agin? I knows how, wi' egg and flour."

"Let un bide, I tell 'ee. Them as lets alone bricking doesn't need to larn mendin'. Com' 'ee down, Madam."

Jocha came down: but she perceived that her father would not let her be alone with the broken-nosed teapot. He sent her off to the shop, though in general he declared he was ruined whenever his wife or daughter hinted at any necessity for a purchase.

When he went to work next day, he craftily bade her leave the "chaney" alone: as if his solicitude was all for its preservation without additional damage. But when he was safe off, and her stepmother, too, she again mounted the dresser, and took the teapot down.

"Lard! I didn't think the ole mugster were sa crafty," she cried to herself in involuntary admiration of the paternal genius. Inside the teapot were sundry scraps of broken pottery and one or two leaden medals of King George III's Jubilee, which did ample justice

to the facial angle and receding forehead of that great but unfortunate monarch.

Jocha rattled the teapot and shook her head.

"'Tain't the same jingle, though," she assured herself. "'Twere sufferins, I lay, what jingled yes'er-day."

On his return from work Mr. Nadder could not resist a complacent glance at the top of the dresser.

"Has you bin interferin' wi' the chaney?" he demanded, in a tone of judicial severity.

"Not I, feather. 'Once cot twice curful,' as the rat said when he squeezed out o' the gin."

Mr. Nadder smiled grimly, but it was not lost on his daughter that thenceforth he enlarged more and more on the disgrace she had brought on him and "hizn," and suggested more and more plainly his desire that she should change her residence. He was obviously ill at ease whenever he went out to work and had to leave her behind with hours of opportunity for solitary rum-maging. He could not set his wife to keep watch on her without having two people's suspicion aroused instead of one, nor could Mrs. Nadder stop at home all day without losing the bit of money her "charring" brought in.

Jocha had been willing enough to go, but she would go now only on terms; and at last, after many wrangles with the old man, in which her unbridled tongue gave her one advantage, and her perfect knowledge of what she wanted another, he did bribe her to leave the paternal roof. We know that her chance meeting with Consuelo filled her purse to much better purpose.

As soon as she heard that her father had had another "seizure" she determined to go down and be on the spot. He had twice before had "seizures," and she understood that three was the orthodox number: the third was the worst and last by all she had ever heard.

"I thought I'd come and 'elp 'ee nurse'n," she in-

formed her stepmother with unwonted affability as she removed her hat, whose plumes reminded the poor woman uncomfortably of a hearse. "I know you likes to go out and earn a bit: father keeps 'ee that close wi' the money."

Mrs. Nadder disliked her stepdaughter, and had a dutiful, though unreasonable fondness for her unpleasant old husband, but she turned naturally to anyone who would treat her as an aggrieved person. A grievance was the only luxury she had ever been able to call her own.

"That he do, poor lamb," she groaned, regarding the unconscious figure on the bed with a queer mixture of querulous complaint and indulgence; "'tis his losses."

She had suffered for years from his meanness and parsimony, but could not help admiring him for qualities far above her capacity. It was her own nature to be wasteful and extravagant. If she had half a crown in her pocket she could not resist some useless absurdity that cost eighteenpence which Mrs. Orans of the shop assured her was the very latest thing. The possession of such illicit trifles brought her but a fearful joy, for they must never be detected by Job.

"Well, you go out and char: and I'll live in house and see to 'ee," said Jocha, who had never the least objection to other people's working so long as she had nothing to do herself.

So on the morrow Mrs. Nadder sallied forth, and Jocha began to enjoy herself. She searched high and she searched low, but her father had been too knowing for her.

"The old image!" she said to herself fifty times, pausing in her labour of love to come and make sure if he were really as lost to outward impressions as he seemed. She, too, had a sort of respect for the mean craft that baffled her. Once she was eagerly climbing

up to examine the top of an old crazy wardrobe of painted deal that stood in the sick chamber itself. There was a sort of depression, and in it, hidden from below by a kind of ornamental parapet, were two or three dirty little boxes. The stool on which she stood played her false, and she came down rather noisily. Picking herself up with some irritation, she darted a hasty glance at the bed. It seemed to her that the hitherto expressionless face had a malignant grin upon it.

"The old image!" she said to herself with exasperation. "Was 'ee sayin' aught, feather?" she asked aloud, shouting in the apparently heedless ear on the pillow. "Did 'ee stir?"

The bluish lips certainly moved: and she stooped lower to hear.

"'Nothin' in my 'and I bring,'" murmured the dying man, with the same horrible smile on his twisted mouth.

"Not if I knows it," Jocha promised herself, remembering with satisfaction that as her parent had brought nothing into the world, so he could, whatever he might wish, carry nothing out. All the same, she thought she would leave alone searching in his room for the present: and she was tired of ransacking the kitchen. It was then that the idea of writing a note to Hurdcott occurred to her. She must do something, and it was an occupation which would keep her still: if the old man was really conscious he would not hear her moving about. Should she not find any money it would be convenient to get as much as would take her back to London — perhaps enough to repay what it had cost to come down, as well — out of Hurdcott.

She bade him meet her at the old mill at an hour which she knew would appear to him less objectionable than if she had asked him to come at night.

He did come, and she saw plainly enough how he

hated meeting her again. It was a very long time since they had met, and he was in every way altered. He had become a man, and she perceived that he was much handsomer than he had been as a mere lad. His manner was not lost on her, though she could not understand how he came by it. He was there in obedience to her call, but he evidently intended to know what she had meant by saying she had something he *must* hear. Still he did not ask her rudely, or even roughly: that only made his aversion more apparent. At first she was a little cowed, but the sound of her own voice gave her assurance, and she tried to match his aloofness with a confident swagger.

"I'll tell 'ee," she said; "I'll tell 'ee fast enough. It concerns that fine young foreign Madam, down to the Manor, as thinks such a lot of 'ee."

Hurdcott flushed angrily and told her that he did not choose to talk to her about that lady. He had never, indeed, talked about her to anyone.

"Well, there's a thing as she wouldn't like to know, and it's what you'd not like her to 'ear. Just you keep quiet, and listen awhile. 'Twill be better for 'ee, and better for that young Madam, too. I come down to see feather, as lies adying. And I doubt he'll die and niver gie me a penny for my trouble. I want to get back to London: so don't 'ee be begging me to bide down 'ere."

She interrupted herself with a crackling laugh: but Hurdcott stood opposite her in watchful silence. He was certainly lovely to look at, thought Jocha, admiring his tall, slight figure, his face, and even his manner of standing still.

"I *must* bide 'ere, though," she went on, "till I get the money to take me away again. You give me that, and I'll be off, for good an' all. No fear o' me comin'

down 'ere again to stepmother when feather's gone. You gie me the three pounds, and I'm out o' your way. . . ."

She paused again: and eyed him narrowly. She saw he would do anything he could to have her away: and it irritated her, though it was all she had to work on.

"I haven't got three pounds," he told her, but she perceived that he would give it if he had — to get rid of her, and she retorted more venomously:

"Well, get it. I'll tell *her* else who pays for the child."

Of course Hurdcott could not know that she had told this already, and that Consuelo had simply disbelieved it. He did not flush again, but his face whitened with a scorn and loathing that half frightened the wretched girl: nevertheless, it did not frighten her altogether. She had a conviction that he would do no violence to her: and being loathed and scorned did not incline her to a softer temper.

"I've warned 'ee," she said, getting as red as he was white.

"I'll get the money," he said, in a cold voice, turning from her to the door. "But it will take time. I'll bring it here on Monday night. To-morrow's Sunday, and every place in Chalkminster will be shut up. On Monday night at eight o'clock I'll bring it here."

"You'd better," she called after him, as he went out of the ruined mill.

For a minute or two she stood still in the doorless doorway, watching him go.

"He do walk like a lord," she said to herself.

Then she came out too, and went across the patch of waste ground towards a gap in the hedge of her father's garden. As she flaunted down between the plots where potatoes had been she caught sight of Basil and Consuelo on horseback, evidently looking her way,

and she shook herself with laughter. "Madam" had clearly a regular young man now.

"Lard! What a fool 'e be," she chuckled to herself, turning to look after Hurdcott, whom she could still see, though the brow of the hill hid him from the riders. His hasty pace, and downward glance told her pretty well how he was feeling. She did not for a moment suppose that Hurdcott lifted his eyes to the Squire's niece: he was a fool because he cared what the Squire's niece might think of him when he could never be anything to her.

All the same, she felt sure that Consuelo must perceive that Hurdcott and she had been having a meeting, and that it would be hateful to the young lady. So she laughed more vigorously than ever, and hoped that Miss would see, if she could not hear, her. It did not occur to Jocha that Hurdcott had promised to bring the three pounds, which he said he had not got, without intending to bring them. She was much more given to playing other people false than to supposing they could deceive her. Had she suspected that he had made a counter-plot, that his proposal to meet her at the mill again at night had any sinister purpose, she might have afforded to send him another note and refuse the meeting: for within an hour of her return to the cottage a sufficient success rewarded her efforts to make her independent of his three pounds.

It being Saturday, it occurred to her to wind up the tall eight-day clock: and while doing so she remembered that she had never searched it. How she had been so stupid she could not tell — perhaps because it was such an obvious place to hide a thing in.

The harsh, grinding sound of the winding had hardly begun before her father's voice was heard from the bedroom above: an open stairway led to it without a door either at top or bottom.

Jocha ceased her winding and went unwillingly up: the old man's cry had something ghastly in it: it was surprisingly loud, such a scream as one makes in nightmare: but it was not only a wail of terror, though terror was in it: there was rage and fury, too. Jocha was almost equally afraid of staying where she was and of facing him. But it was Saturday and past one o'clock — quarter to two by the clock she had been winding — and her stepmother might come in at any minute. If she returned and found Jocha downstairs, and heard her husband crying out, there would be trouble. So Jocha went: she heard a heavy, stumbling foot on the boards above, and then a fall. At the stairhead there was a small window consisting of a single pane of glass, and through it she caught sight of her stepmother coming up the lane: she turned the other way and saw the old man lying prone on the floor. He made no sound now, and the sunlight from the bedroom window fell brightly on his upturned face. She was sure that he was dead. In an instant she turned and ran down again. In the bottom of the clock was a paper parcel, with loose, crumpled papers thrust in over it. But the parcel itself, though small, was heavy, and Jocha hauled it up with a beating heart. It was tied about and about with bits of knotted string pieced together — when the old miser had made the packet he had a long piece of good tape that would have been much better, and would have saved him trouble, but he could not bear to “waste” it, even for the sake of his beloved guineas. Jocha's own bed was in the kitchen, and she determined to thrust the parcel in under the mattress; but she could not wait in absolute suspense, and contrived to tear through the different folds of paper at one corner: two or three guineas rolled out. Her heart gave a jump: if it was all guineas there must be more than a hundred pounds. She heard her stepmother's step outside, and thrust the

packet into the bed, then turned and quickly ran upstairs as lightly as she could. When she heard the house door open she screamed sharply, and came clattering noisily down again.

"Eh, mother! Feather's dead, I doubt," she gasped. "I heard un scrammle out o's bed, and heard un on the floor: I were windin' o' the clock, and ran up: he fell fore iver I could get anigh un, and there 'e do lie for dead. 'E be dead, I doubt. . . . Oh, I'm glad you'n come, I niver see one dead afore. . . ." Jocha seemed trembling all over. The old woman fell into a feeble whimpering.

CHAPTER XXXIII

WHEN Basil and Consuelo got home they were told that her aunts had stepped round to Mr. Stratford's; the old gentleman was not so well. They went into the oak drawing-room and stood by the fire before going upstairs to change.

"So you are going away to-morrow," she said, smiling.

"Sunday is not a proper day for going and coming," he observed demurely.

She laughed at his sudden deference to Christian and Protestant susceptibilities.

"The better the day the better the deed," she said cheerfully.

"It is a mistake to conclude that every unpleasant deed is good."

They both laughed, and he declared that Monday would be much better than Sunday.

"Saturday — what objection is there to Saturday?" she asked.

"If I went away to-day, after having said nothing to your aunts this morning about going, they would think you and I had quarrelled while we were out."

"It would serve you right if we *had* quarrelled," she said. "It was not your fault that we didn't." Then she looked up and met his eyes with a frank and very friendly smile. "I will never quarrel with you," she added, "if only you will go on as we are. I will like you more and more if —"

"If what?"

"If you will not like me much."

He could not help laughing.

"If I promise to like you less and less! I'll do my best."

"Honour bright?"

She did not really say "Honour bright," because the expression was not known to her: but when she said, "Parole d'honneur" she meant it.

He gave his word, and she rewarded him.

"I *am* glad," she said. "There is no one I like so much as you. And my idea is, one never does *like* people whom one . . ." she blushed a little, but got the word out "whom one is in love with, as they call it. Some girls seem born to be in love: I was born a sister."

"I thought you were an only child."

"Mr. and Mrs. Dauntsey's only child? Yes. But I belong to a large family."

"You mean mankind! You are everybody's sister."

She nodded.

"So you *like* everybody?"

She perceived the treacherous bearing of this question, and answered it as it deserved.

"Till they worry me."

"I will not worry you," he said quietly.

"Basil," she said, "perhaps I seem to you merely selfish: determined to make use of your friendship just as far as fits in with my own humour or my own pleasure. I do not want you to think so badly of me."

He told her very earnestly that he could not think badly of her, that he knew her much too well to suspect her of the least selfishness: she thanked him with all her heart, and added:

"It was because I could not let you think of me like that that I myself have come back to the subject: you may say I ought to have let well alone. I like you so much, and trust you so much, that I feel I can say just what is in my mind, though you may refuse to agree

with it. You were trying to say something this morning which I tried to stop your saying: and the reason was this. What you meant is not true."

"Not true that I love you!"

"It is true that you love, and equally true that I love you," she answered simply: "I love you, dear Basil, so well that in any trouble I should think first of you, and turn to you for help. Does that sound selfish, too — keeping you for my comfort in sorrow?"

"May no trouble or sorrow come to you, dear," he said.

"It comes to everyone. Who am I that I should escape it?"

"Then turn to me. Selfish! To give me the noblest of all proofs of trust and confidence."

She thanked him with a smile that overpaid him, and then went on.

"I know that I may turn to you. I know that you love me, and I have shown how much I love you: but, Basil, neither you nor I have for the other the love you meant."

"I cannot expect you to have it for me."

"There is no question of expecting; only a question of fact: and the plain fact is that you are no more *in love* with me than I am with you."

Does it not seem hard on him? Less than an hour ago, he had been trying to tell her that he was in love with her, and now she was quietly assuring him that she knew his mind better than he had known it. Nevertheless, she spoke, not with wilful refusal to admit a fact, but with the conviction that only real knowledge gives. She knew what love was not, because she knew what love was.

He did not protest: and, because he was really a gentleman and noble-minded, he would not let her see that he understood whence her quiet certainty of knowl-

edge came. He thought, and he hoped, that she did not understand herself: if she did not, it might save her immense pain not to know.

"You *are* good," she said, because he did not protest. "Do not think I am trying to make little of the true affection you have for me. It is what I treasure. It seems to me that there is nothing so splendid as being loved: no one altogether deserves it: it is a free gift. All my life I shall be happier because you do love me: and all your life you will know that I love you. We ought each of us to be better because we know it is so. But, Basil, there *is* the Red Mist. You spoke of it first: and perhaps to-day I remind you of it lightly. It is not for you."

He was again too fine a gentleman to ask, "Is it for you, then?" After all, there are men in the world whom women may trust. Nor is life-long training lost in a few weeks.

"Some people are for themselves only," she went on, laying a gentle hand on his arm. "You are not of them. For you the Red Mist would be a waste and a spoiling. If I could have said what you thought you wanted me to say I should always afterwards have known that I had stood between you and yourself — which belongs neither to you nor me."

Her long, slim fingers lay still confidently upon his arm, but he never thought of touching them with his own.

"How could I be God's thief?" she cried, in a low voice of perfect tenderness and sincerity. "You never could have been *mine*, even if I could have given myself to be yours. There are men to whom a girl may give herself to please them — because they seem so good and so deserving that she has not the heart to refuse so small a thing as herself, although she has not for them that which people call love. I think too much of you for that.

All their goodness and deservingness deserves no more. But it is different with you. You are not your own, and you could not give me yourself, or try to give it, without cheating something greater than yourself. In the Red Mist the sun of your true life would be choked. You would not ask *me* to choke it?"

He would not: but because he was, after all, half an Englishman, and had half an Englishman's shrinking from confessed emotion, he said with a smile that was almost like that of a teasing boy:

"And is this how you would teach me to love you less!"

"Ah, no! Love me more and more, as I shall you. Some love can only be as great as the one beloved: yours, if you will not tie it up, can grow as great as all there is to love in earth and heaven."

He could not but note how she always spoke of *him*: of what *his* love might be if he would sacrifice the lesser impulse to squander it all on one spending on herself. But he did not, even in heart, accuse her in this of keeping silence as to herself because she had something of her own to hide: he knew her too well for that, and seemed to himself to know her better even within the last half-hour. She was one of those rare persons who are less interested in themselves than in those who are dear to them, and he knew she had never been anxious to talk of herself. She had so seldom made herself their theme that he had learned from her, without being aware of it, to speak much less of himself.

He could not tell her that hers was an austere doctrine, for it was his own: and he was not so shallow as to want to deny its truth because he had been tempted to abdicate it for himself. Neither was he stupid enough to flatter himself that, since she confessed to so much love for him, he might, with time, be able to change the quality of that love into that which, a little while ago, he had wished

to ask of her. He knew that the two sorts of love differ not in degree but in kind: and he was convinced that she was only able to tell him how dear he was to her, because he never could be dear to her in the way he had meant. He would never again tease her, and he knew that she was sure of it. If he could help her, if a trouble indeed should come to her and she were to turn to him as she had promised, he would not fail her. That promise of hers was harder to have confidence in than anything she had said: for it was her nature to keep nothing for her own but her sorrows, and to bear anything life might bring alone. He felt that it was less unlikely trouble would come. Her beauty was not of a melancholy cast: nevertheless, it seemed to him that there was a quality in it that belongs to those across whose life the shadow of tragedy is to fall.

"The finest service is love and obedience," he said, raising his eyes from the throbbing heart of the red fire to meet hers loyally. "I will not only love, but obey."

She bent her lovely head in thanks for which she could find no words.

"And you," he begged of her; "you will hold yourself bound by your promise. If a sorrow attacks you — fate, not love, is blind, or it could not — you will turn to me."

She paused a moment: he knew that it was not easy for her to resolve, in case of a wound to her own life, to let the pain of it touch him. Then she answered:

"I gave the promise before you asked it. I will keep it."

"You cannot have *all* your own way," he said, with a smile far gentler than a lover's.

He knew that all the way of her own she found it hard to relinquish was the liberty of keeping to herself

any stab life might deal her. Her promise showed how much she would give up for love of him.

It was not now out of mere boyish egoism that he chose to talk a little of himself.

"Is it your notion of me," he asked smilingly, "that I am destined to wear the Saffron Robe?"

She did not even know what the phrase meant, and told him so.

"The Buddhist monks do not all live in cloisters," he explained. "Some are wandering mendicants: the outward symbol of their calling is the beggar's wooden bowl and a saffron frock."

"No," she said simply, "I was not thinking of that: it was not so much the form of your life as of its quality I was thinking." Then she smiled as another idea arose in her mind out of his own suggestion. "Perhaps," she added, "you will be a Christian monk."

"If I became a Christian I should certainly be a monk," he answered confidently.

This time her inward smile was not suffered to rise to her lips. Young men who are really in love do not readily contemplate the possibility of becoming monks. But she remembered something which brought the smile to the surface in spite of herself.

"Well, what is it?" he asked.

"I was thinking," she told him, "of a girl we knew at Palermo: the daughter of the Spanish ambassador. One of the attachés of the Swedish Legation fell in love with her, and she fell in love with him: he saw he might ask, and he was not refused; only she declared that it was out of the question for her to marry a Protestant. After some hesitation he said that he would hear all there was to be said on the Catholic side, and give his serious and full consideration to it: if he could be convinced he would be ready to adopt her faith, but he would not join the Church unless his intellect were satisfied, and he

really found that he *believed*. She could ask no better: and introduced him to Dom Mauro Incorpore, a very learned and very spiritual Benedictine. She was rather impatient, and the conversion itself took a good while, but it came too soon at last: for the attaché not only became a Catholic, but made up his mind to be a monk also."

"Not a Benedictine, I hope, for the credit of Dom Mauro," laughed Basil.

"Oh, no! Nothing short of a Carthusian would do for him. He told poor Camela that, having found, by her help, the true faith, he could not be content without choosing the highest expression of it. We always suspected that he tried to make her enter holy religion, too: she never had a good word for nuns afterwards, and when the old Duca di San Titaldo began to make love to her, people said he did it by abusing his daughter for joining the Orsoline."

"Was it the recollection of this shocking story that decided you on introducing me to the nuns' chaplain?" he demanded severely.

"I did not remember it till afterwards. But 'tis a wholesome story to bear in mind. Picture my feelings if I had jumped at your offer and you had to confess, in a month or two, that, if I pleased, you would, on the whole, prefer to be a Carmelite!"

"I do not believe you *have* any feelings."

"One can't help having a few . . . here comes Aunt Amelia. I wonder how Uncle Stratford is."

CHAPTER XXXIV

ON Monday, when Basil had really gone home, The Manx House seemed to Consuelo very empty without him. The aunts were a little mysterious and had an air of expectation to hear news that degenerated into something like crossness when they were told nothing. If Consuelo began to speak with a smile they would pull up with almost greedy attention, and have relays of smiles of their own in readiness: but when, after all, she said nothing in particular, they seemed mildly exasperated. At least Amelia betrayed symptoms of exasperation and Priscilla's mildness took on a deeper hue of resignation.

"P'r'aps it's all for the best, really," she sighed when Consuelo went out of the room. "I don't know but what she'd find it a trial having to order for him, and he eating nothing but leaves. I know I was at my wits' end what to send in for him."

"Tut, Silla! He'd give over all that rubbish if they made a match of it."

"He came to church, Christmas Day — yesterday, and he read a lot more in the prayer-book than I ever do."

"It was A Man may not Marry His grandmother, and all that. I saw over his shoulder."

"Well, *she's* not his grandmother, nor yet his grandfather's wife; *that* wouldn't put him off. And I know he looked as if he'd like to say, 'Yes, please;' when Athelstan forgot and offered him a cut off the saddle, on Sunday night at dinner. Depend upon it if once he and Consuelo were married he'd eat whatever she ate

and think it a privilege to have a slice like hers on his plate."

"But if he'd asked her she'd tell us."

"Not if she'd said No. It wouldn't be fair like."

"You told me when . . ."

"Lor! That was different; we were sisters and all the parish knew. Not but what the parish must be looking to hear something to the purpose about *her* — after all this riding about and him staying here and all. I know that William of his . . ." Here Consuelo came back and her aunt nearly poked the fire as if she had been doing nothing else all the while her niece had been out of the room. Priscilla, who manœuvred badly, was favoured of fate, for she dropped a dozen stitches and had enough to do to pick them up again to account for any small flutter she betrayed.

"There's a boy called Seringapatam," Consuelo began.

"Syringa, *what?*" Mealy asked, suspending her operation with the poker. The shrub was unknown to her.

"Well, it's not his real name. Mr. Hungerford calls him Seringapatam because his father's leg was shot off there."

"Oh, indeed!" said Priscilla humbly conscious what a number of places there were of which she had never heard; then it occurred to her that it might be the scientific term for the part of the leg shot off.

"Yes, Ephy Muspratt is his other name. And he has found my snake bracelet. He came over to bring it."

Without exactly understanding anything about it Priscilla had an idea that he must have come a long way.

"They'll give him something to eat in the kitchen," she observed hospitably.

"He has gone away again. He was too shy to come in; I had to go and see him at the back door. He asked

for Mr. Hungerford, and, it was only because he was gone away that he consented to see me. He doesn't approve of women, and there were three in the kitchen. He held our horses on Saturday, and to-day it seems he went back to the place for the pleasure of remembering it — Mr. Hungerford gave him half a crown."

"For holding a horse!" exclaimed Priscilla.

"Well, for holding two horses. I offered him another but he did not want to take it."

"Goodness!"

"And when he went back to the place he sat down among the nettles to enjoy the retrospect more vividly. It appears that the horses walked him back against the wall in among 'em. And there he found my snake bracelet; I did not even know I had lost it or that I had been wearing it. I do not usually go out riding in bracelets, and must have forgotten to take it off because I changed in a hurry."

"He must be honest," observed Priscilla tentatively.

"Oh, of course. And he walked over all that way to bring it back. He had to find out where I lived from the priest."

"And how much did you give him for bringing it back?" asked Cornelia. "Half a guinea, I warrant."

"He wouldn't take anything. 'Drop that' he called out. 'Tweren't my brace-lid. Don' 'ee offer to pay I for not kippin' other folk's joolery. Feather'd leather me else — ony you tell the gentleman as gie me arf a crownd as I brought it back to un.' Seringapatam doesn't make much count of girls."

Consuelo showed her aunt the bracelet, which they knew by sight much better than she supposed; they had never had any jewellery of their own and admired it from afar; Consuelo had a good deal and did not care about it.

"The Queen gave it to my mother when she married. It is beautiful workmanship, isn't it?"

The snake was perfectly flexible, his scales were alternately of gold and platinum and of tiny brilliants, rubies or emeralds.

"I doubt 'twould be unlucky, tho', for a wedding present," Priscilla observed, shaking her head a little. The only serpent she could remember in history being associated with lamentable misfortune to the first married couple.

"Oh, no," Consuelo reassured her, laughing. "The snake with his tail in his mouth is the emblem of eternity — and so of changeless fidelity. Uncle Stratford's man has been round; he is much better to-night." Early in the afternoon she and Basil had been to see the old gentleman.

He came to say good-bye, Basil had said. "Donna Consuelo thinks I ought to go and see how my home gets on without me."

Uncle Stratford was flattered at the visits of farewell and smiled gratefully.

"Well, Sir," he remarked, "you're not going very far. I daresay we shall see you again when you *have* gone home."

"Oh, yes. And I'm not really going to oblige Donna Consuelo, but because they can't all come to luncheon with me again till I do go."

Uncle Stratford was puzzled by the young man's allusion to obliging his niece by departing. But he perceived that they were very intimate.

"It is not that I drove him away," Consuelo declared, "but his own conscience. He knows that he only invited himself for two nights and he stayed four or five days."

Still the old gentleman could understand only that the

young people seemed on uncommonly easy terms: he was himself accustomed to the stiffness of middle-class English life. His complacence had almost the air of a paternal benediction. Basil and Consuelo were amused. They had no idea that their behaviour was seriously affecting his intentions as to his will.

They chatted for half-an-hour with him, and went away with the pleasant consciousness of having done him good. There was nothing specially the matter with him except old age and an irritable temper that chafed at loneliness and superannuation. His temper was as strong as ever: it is remarkable how vigorously an originally hot one retains its vital warmth after the decay of other faculties.

They would have gone away much less comfortably had they been able to see through two walls into the little white drawing-room, where there never was a fire, in which Uncle Stratford's lawyer was waiting for their departure, and been also aware of what took place after their departure.

On that Monday night the mild, soft weather changed, and after seven hours of snow, a little frost set in, which lasted far on into the first month of the new year. It kept Uncle Stratford in bed, but set all the young folk skating or sliding.

Consuelo knew nothing of skating, but Mr. Caradoc was eager to teach her. Along the water-meadows towards Sherton was a flat bit of marsh-land, which, even in a dry winter, became a shallow lake, with alders and willows for islands here and there. It did not make first-rate ice, but had the merit of freezing early, and of being absolutely safe. Between it and the highroad was a narrow field where gypsies pitched their tents a week or so before Christmas, usually staying on till February or March.

Here Consuelo learned to skate, and Basil, too, for he

knew no more of it than she did. Mr. Caradoc began to teach him also, but with less interest in his pupil. Mr. Caradoc was English enough to feel that men ought to know such things of themselves. He was aware that the Ganges in its Delta offers no facilities for acquiring experience in skating: nevertheless, he thought Hungerford rather a muff for not knowing all about it. If Basil had been more ashamed of his ignorance Caradoc might have helped him with a little more considerate condescension: but though the Indian-bred, and half Oriental young man apologised cheerfully for the trouble he gave, he did not give the idea of experiencing much sense of moral inferiority on account of his deficiencies. Apologies without contrition can never satisfy those who are blameless themselves.

As it happened, Basil did not trouble Mr. Caradoc long; on the second day he thought he would hide his blundering performance from his instructor's impatient criticism, and withdrew to a part of the ice where he would be almost out of sight. Where Consuelo was receiving her lesson there was better ice, but the corner Basil found for himself was almost hidden behind a temporary island of willow-brake and alders. If he did badly there, no one would be pained by it. It cannot be said that Mr. Caradoc missed him soon or much regretted his absence when Consuelo noticed it.

"Oh, he's all right," the undergraduate observed cheerfully; "he has gone round there to tumble down at his leisure. I'm afraid I rather hustled him. It seems odd, you know, to come across a fellow who's no good at out door things."

"Perhaps they do not skate much in his part of India — any more than we did in Palermo."

"Oh, a girl's different. How could you be expected to know without learning? You learn uncommon quick, too."

Meanwhile Basil was learning under a new master. He had not been long in his secluded corner before he saw a young man coming over the snow with skates in his hand, and promptly recognized Hurdcott. He himself was half hidden behind a bush, where he was standing still practising the art of not falling down, as Caradoc had suggested, at his leisure. When Hurdcott came to the edge of the ice he caught sight of Mr. Hungerford, and seemed to hesitate, as if not sure whether he ought to do as he had intended and skate there.

Basil got as near to him as he could, and said, laughing:

"I wish you would come and teach me. I only began yesterday, and Mr. Caradoc is evidently shocked at the stupidity of his pupil. I came round here to hide my ignominy."

Hurdcott was not in love with Mr. Caradoc, and showed himself very willing to help the beginner. After a while Basil saw that he skated rather better than the young gentleman from Cambridge.

"I knew you would skate well," he observed, with a frank admiration of his new teacher's skill that Hurdcott found very pleasant.

"How did you know, sir? "

Basil laughed and answered with the same plain directness:

"Because you walk so well."

Hurdcott, of course, had no idea how he walked.

"Most English people don't walk at all," Basil went on. "They get their bodies from place to place, but it isn't walking."

He found Hurdcott not only a more patient teacher than Mr. Caradoc, but a much better one. He presently began to doubt if his own stupidity would prove as crass as he had feared: for he certainly made progress,

the sweet sign of which was that he already found himself beginning to enjoy the new method of motion.

As he talked to Hurdcott he understood more and more why Consuelo had been struck by something unusual in him. His gentleness was itself peculiar. The tall, very strong and manly young fellow had none of the roughness of a peasant, nor even the different sort of roughness which Mr. Caradoc thought polite enough for another man. It was not mere deference yielded by inferior to higher rank, for Basil was certain that his companion was thinking nothing of it: and with all his courtesy there was a freedom from constraint and embarrassment that was delightful. When Basil first arrived in England he had been constantly driven to ask himself if anything could make his "inferiors" forget for a pleasant moment that he was a lord.

Another thing was striking in Hurdcott — the combination of ignorance with intelligence. He had no miraculous knowledge of things he could have never learned, and his opportunities of learning had been scant enough, but he understood instantly.

Basil discovered within half an hour that there were indeed a dozen things worth remarking in his teacher, but recognized that none of them, nor all of them together, fully accounted for the impression produced. When all was said the fact itself remained that Hurdcott was simply uncommon.

Once, as they stood still face to face, something occurred to Basil that he noted unwillingly. He had told Hurdcott to skate by himself for a bit and let him rest after the exertions of learning.

"You must want a little rest, too, after the harder labour of teaching," he had said. "Go and skate by yourself, and I will see what I can learn by watching."

Hurdcott did as he was told, only saying that it was

no labour to teach. As he skimmed over the ice Basil admired not only his skill but his natural grace.

When he came back and stood still he told his pupil that it was very easy.

"You will soon find it so," he said; "it is only practise you want, sir, and this frost looks like lasting. You'll have plenty of opportunity."

He glanced round the hard gray sky that looked almost black above the white valley and the white downs. The downs themselves seemed almost like mountains in their alpine dress.

"The snow came with a wind," he said, "though it has been so still since. See how it lies in drifts."

The road had been covered too deep for traffic till cleared: on the hill to their right the ruined wind-mill frowned black and stunted, for it stood knee-deep in drift. The door was quite hidden.

As Hurdcott's eyes came back and met Basil's there was a strange expression in them. The sight of the mill had brought to his mind the recollection of the last time, only three or four nights ago, that he had been there: when he kept his appointment with Jocha.

Then it was that Basil read on his face something which, with a swift, unwelcome twist of association, reminded him of Consuelo — the look of tragedy.

Consuelo herself was scarcely more gentle than Hurdcott: the quality of gentleness was oddly pronounced in both. And in both it had something wistful, poignant, pathetic about it. There are eyes and mouths that tell of the power to inflict wounds mercilessly, in self-defence, or in sheer offence. There was no likeness of feature whatever between Consuelo and Hurdcott; beyond the fact that both were very dark, with a darkness that was not English, they were altogether unlike. Her beauty was very girlish, his peculiarly virile. Nevertheless, in his eyes and hers, on his mouth and hers, there

lay the same expression — of a cruel patience of misfortune: of a helplessness against calamity that set Basil remembering his own half-jesting word as to the blindness of assaulting fate.

Basil, not yet a Christian, was without the trivial inconsequent belief in luck and ill-luck of many who esteem themselves strong in Christian faith: as to fate, he had never arranged with himself what he believed: but with half his blood he had inherited the idea of it, as of irresponsible force to which the gods themselves bow, as trees before the inanimate tempest that knows no pity, and shows no favour, because it has neither heart nor consciousness. That the tempest is itself a servant; that the wild medley of unearned favours and undeserved blows he called fate is more than an eternally tangled knot, is, in fact, part of the Great Weaver's work, with a pattern austere but not illegible, that he could not yet perceive.

All he saw now was something from which he shrank as from a hurt — the same look of tragedy on two faces, one of which was dear to him, and the other already not indifferent. In any case, Hurdcott would have stood apart, for him, from the common crowd of his contemporaries, for the interest Consuelo showed in him. And he not only had swiftly come to understand that interest, but to share it, by an inexplicable force of attraction. He could not separate them: what linked them was not any conscious mutual tie between themselves: but something from which he recoiled unselfishly, an instinct that the blow which struck one would hit the other.

CHAPTER XXXV

BASIL, when he saw Hurdcott's eye fall from their glance of repulsion at the ruined mill, did not intentionally turn his own thither: but they had sought it by a natural impulse, too quick for the control of will.

It was the glance of a mere moment: then he looked away again at once. All day there had scarcely been a gleam of sunlight: there was no fog in the valley or on the downs, only the sky brooded low and thick, and the upper air was choked. At noon one could see where the sun was, a white ball hung in gray mist: half the ball showed now above the low hill where the mill stood, but of a glowing red like the heart of a fire. A flush, guilty and lurid, lay on the snow: the mill itself had turned black, and crouched huddled in the deep drift. In ordinary weather, all but the roof of the two cottages would have been hidden from where Basil and Hurdcott stood in the valley-bottom: covered with snow, it did not now show at all, but was merged in the dreary waste of dark. Along the valley the course of the road was marked by a line of black hedge: between it and them were three gypsy tents out of which smoke rose straight up in the still air. They could see the light of the fires from which the smoke came.

"Let us have one more turn," Basil said, turning away.

Still the picture hung in his mind like a memory, though it was but a moment before that he had been looking at it. Neither he, nor anyone in the world, save one man, knew that the ruined mill was a tomb.

Jocha's father died on Saturday an hour after noon. On Monday at three o'clock he was buried. Mrs. Nadder thought it much too soon, but the parson sent word that he was going away on Tuesday morning, and Jocha herself declared that she should return to London by the coach on Monday night. Her stepmother had never any force of resistance, and gave way. She would not be sorry to see the last of her husband's daughter. Jocha was impatient to be gone: it had been hateful shut up in that dismal cottage with the whimpering old woman and the dead man upstairs.

The coach would pass along the London Road soon after nine o'clock: she intended to walk over Thorney Down and join it. If she were too soon she could walk slowly on towards the Hut and let it overtake her. A few minutes before eight she told her stepmother it was time she should be going, and they parted without affection and without regret. The old woman sat by the fire thinking of Job in his new grave down by the little church in the valley. When Jocha was gone she reached down the prayer-book, and tried to spell out the funeral service she had heard that afternoon. The wind was tearing round the crazy cottage, making ugly rumblings in the draughty chimney. The snow began an hour afterwards.

Of Jocha and her chill journey she did not think at all: it was a relief to be without her: since the old man died the girl had been "queer," fidgety, restless, and evidently longing to be gone.

Jocha went out by the door into the lane: her stepmother locked it behind her and went back to the fire. For a few moments she could hear the girl's footsteps, then they died away. Just beyond the cottages Jocha doubled back across the grass and made for the mill. If Hurdcott did not keep his word it would not matter much, for she had a parcel of gold that was heavy to

carry, but delightful to carry, too. Nevertheless, Jocha liked the idea of having his three guineas as well: she was not a miser like her father, but your spender can be as greedy as your hoarder, and she thought that if she had Hurdcott's three guineas the rest would be clear profit — she need not encroach on her parcel for the journey. She amused herself wondering how he had raised the money. At the door of the mill he was waiting for her.

"Let us have another turn," Basil said to Hurdcott; "then it will be time for me to stop. I shall not come here to-morrow. I want to ride over to Avonsbury and see the priest there."

When they had finished their turn he said good-bye to Hurdcott, and thanked him for his teaching.

"If the frost lasts I shall come again the day after to-morrow," he said. "Shall you be here, too?"

"I don't think you will want much more teaching: but I shall be here, and proud to go on teaching if you will let me."

As they parted Basil held out his hand with a smile full of friendly kindness. When they had shaken hands he went back to Consuelo and Mr. Caradoc.

"Admire my progress," he laughed, for he had his skates on still.

Hurdcott went on skating, and his thoughts were of the young man who had just left him. He had only one standard of excellence, and Basil seemed to him so nice as to resemble, in some far-off fashion, Consuelo. There was nothing really alike in them unless it was something in their manner of treating Hurdcott himself. He had come across very few people of their class, but he was sure that ladies and gentlemen did not usually behave as they did to him. They were familiar without what is called familiarity. Neither of them thought of their own rank, nor of his nameless obscurity: to both

of them he was a human being, and to neither of them were the accidents and trappings of existence of much consequence.

One of the men from the gypsy tents came down to the edge of the ice and watched Hurdcott for a few moments: as he turned away there was an expression on his face as dark and ruthless as that of the mill where Jocha lay in her big cold tomb.

Basil and Mr. Caradoc escorted Consuelo home, where the former got on his horse and rode away home, thinking as he went of Hurdcott, and trying not to think of Consuelo at the same time.

Caradoc went in and stood talking for a little while in the drawing-room before saying good-bye. He had thoroughly enjoyed his afternoon, and felt as if he had known Consuelo a long time.

"You have improved wonderfully," he declared. "I never saw anyone make so much progress in so short a time."

"It all depends on the teacher," she replied, and he began to look delighted. "See how well Mr. Hungerford got on to-day."

Mr. Caradoc's expression of satisfaction modified. He did not think Basil's improvement relevant, and, though he had never exchanged six words with his teacher, he disliked him.

"Oh, Hungerford! It's odd when a gentleman has to learn an outdoor sport from a yokel."

"I don't think I know what a yokel means," Consuelo answered: nevertheless, she knew what Caradoc's tone meant, and she was not a person who would listen smilingly to disparagement of a friend.

"A yokel means a fellow like that."

"It must mean something rather rare, then," she said quietly. "He is not like anyone I ever met. I told Basil so, and I daresay he was glad of the chance

of finding out if I was right — if your ‘yokel’ was as uncommon as I had said.”

“He is not *my* yokel,” Caradoc protested with a laugh. “Of course, I’ve often seen him about, but — of course again — I have never talked to him.”

Consuelo was able to make a silence express her meaning as well as a phrase, and she now held her tongue. Caradoc quite understood that she was saying, “To talk to him! For you to talk to him would be too much condescension: why condescend to talk *about* him?”

“If that young fellow is your *protégé*,” he said, “I can understand Hungerford’s willingness to . . .”

Consuelo laughed a little before Mr. Caradoc had finished his remark.

“He would not be an easy person to *protégé*,” she observed. “Here comes my aunt to ascertain if my feet are damp.”

Before he took his leave Mr. Caradoc asked if Miss Dauntsey would skate again next day.

“My mother says she shall come and try if she has forgotten how to skate.”

He had heard Basil say that he was going to Avonsbury on the morrow, and thought that the absence of a *chaperon* might deter Consuelo from continuing her lesson.

“Yes,” said Priscilla, “Lady Caradoc called here to-day and said she was thinking of going with you all to-morrow.”

Aunt Priscilla had been making a rich cake, and brought with her a mild fragrance of expensive groceries and spice.

When Mr. Caradoc had gone away she told her niece that his mother’s father had been “Ambassador or something” at Copenhagen when she was a girl.

“I suppose,” she said, “that’s how she learned to be fond of skating.”

Meanwhile, Caradoc was walking home, thinking of Consuelo, as Basil was at the same moment, and he, too, found himself obliged to think of Hurdcott as well. He disliked joining them in his thoughts for quite a different reason. It annoyed him that he should be obliged to remember the existence of such a fellow: but he had clearly displeased Consuelo by his slighting way of speaking of him, and, as he did not wish to displease her, he had to resolve to be more careful in future. His mother, he had perceived, regarded Consuelo as odd or peculiar: and he thought it odd in her to care in the least how anyone might speak of a mere labourer or shepherd — he did not know what the fellow's calling was. Perhaps a large half of her annoyance had really been on Hungerford's account: he remembered that the remark which had first called her, so to speak, to arms, had been levelled more against the gentleman than the peasant. He did not consider that he had been uncivil, either to-day or yesterday, to Hungerford, but he had inwardly disparaged him, and such feelings express themselves unless one is much on one's guard. To Consuelo he had certainly not spoken with cordiality of her friend. Caradoc was a young man who liked to say what he chose, and it was tiresome to find that he must take care how he spoke of this person or that — he would not more particularly allude in his own mind to Hurdcott, of whom he did not choose to think at all. Of course, he had never discovered anything out of the common in the young poacher or shepherd or whatever he might be: he could not even remember what his face was like — and had he known it by heart he would not have seen on it that look of tragedy which Basil had noted. Nor had he ever read such a look on Consuelo's face. He had not that sort of eyes. He could see a "fact" more quickly and perhaps more accurately than Basil, and he was by no

means dull or unobservant; his observation, however, moved on a different plane: it was directed to the acquisition of knowledge of facts, and lighted by experience and comparison: imagination he disdained as the faculty of beholding what does not exist.

Probably nothing would ever have made Basil and Theodore friends: life to one meant contemplation, to the other action: Caradoc would have held contemplation an obsolete fashion of wasting time: Hungerford thought that time, itself trivial, was rendered more fussy and vexatious by the temporal activities in which such lives as Caradoc's were fretted away. Both were at present egoists; nevertheless, Basil's egoism had a wider scope, and more promise of expansion, and, growing more and more impersonal, it would cease to be egoism at all; Basil had so far a youthful and rather innocent complaisance in his faculty of thinking: Caradoc's self-satisfaction in his capacity for doing seemed more respectable, for its object was the public good, but it was in reality narrower: when it should have reached its widest development it would be merely political and national, whereas Basil's circle would widen out from its centre to universality.

Their introduction to each other had not been propitious: Consuelo had stood between them. True, Basil had not been conscious of any thought of Caradoc as a rival till he had become aware that there was no need to fear him as one: and Caradoc looked down upon Hungerford too much to pay him the compliment of jealousy. Girls, he was sure, do not fall in love with namby-pamby half-girlish men. He merely chafed at her liking him at all. He thought it was a flaw in her taste, which otherwise (she liked *him* also, as he was comfortably assured), seemed very good.

He was right up to a point, for Consuelo was apt to like her fellow-creatures, and when Mr. Caradoc was at

his best she saw a good deal to admire in him. He had a definite and respectable purpose in life, and seemed determined to be neither idle nor useless. He was still quite young, but had clearly no notion of squandering his youth on trivialities: she understood that he had or would have ample means, though his mother was not rich, and he was certainly well-born: with such opportunities it would have been easy, and to most young men would have been tempting, to look on life as mainly provided for his amusement.

He told her much of his intention, and had evidently no great diffidence as to being able to realize them: false modesty was not his fault. Still they were good intentions, and were meant to benefit his generation. Of course he wanted to effect all these improvements himself: the same plans carried out by someone else would hardly produce such good results: but, as Consuelo happened to be unselfish, his bulging egoism did not shock her: it is your thoroughly selfish person who is scandalized by the egoistic taint he detects in his contemporaries.

What made Consuelo different from most of us was her patience of contraries. She was not cross with Basil for his tendency to what Caradoc, if he could have troubled himself about it, would have considered idle and futile waste of short-lived time in contemplation: nor with Caradoc for his somewhat pushful resolution to get a good deal done and to do it himself. To her it seemed simply a question of vocation. God has use for tools of all sorts: all fit the Divine Workman's Hand, and will not break in it, or wound it, if they are of true temper.

So long as Caradoc talked to her of himself and his schemes of life she was interested, and so far he had not troubled her by talking much of her. No doubt it would have been different had she wanted him to be in

love with her: but of his falling in love with her she did not think there was any danger. He did not seem a young man likely to fall in love. Nor was he. I am sure he was not in love with Lady Clara Pincenez, though he married her and quite felt the loss of her when she died three years afterwards, and he had not married her merely because she was daughter of Lord Noseby, or merely because Lord Noseby was Prime Minister, or merely because she was wealthy, and brought her husband much political interest and "connexion." Had she been ugly, ill-tempered or unpleasant, he would not have married her: she was not even plain, and, brimming as she was with blue blood, none of it had settled in her nose: she could be sharp with servants, but was always perfectly amiable towards her husband. He asked Lady Clara to be his wife, because he perceived that she would suit him, and she accepted because she saw he would suit her. Perhaps she imagined he was in love, and very likely he thought she was. In reality, neither of them knew anything about it.

Nor had he learned how to be in love when he took Lady Harriet Monycuik for his second wife: her father was not Prime Minister, only Chancellor of the County Palatine of Durham in one Administration, and Paymaster-General in another, and she was but moderately well-off during her father's life: but her sister was married to the Duke of Ipswich, whose political importance was of the first order, and Lord Noseby himself had married her aunt after the death of Lady Clara's mother. Lady Harriet was better-looking than her predecessor, and much more generally liked; perhaps Mr. Caradoc liked her better, too. But he was not in love, and if Lady Harriet had ever been in that predicament it was all over and done with long before her marriage.

It will be seen that Mr. Caradoc did not marry Consuelo, but there was a time when he had the idea of

doing so much in his mind. He admired her — a great deal more than he ever admired either of the ladies he ultimately persuaded to share his fortunes: she had listened to all his plans with such intelligent interest that he was sure she must be clever, and, as she never spoke of any plans of her own, she was not likely to be over-clever with any tiresome proneness to hankering after separate personal existence. She was well-born, and extremely distinguished, and was not penniless — and his mother declared she would have old Stratford's sixty thousand pounds. But at that time Mr. Caradoc cared less for wealth than he did later when he realized how expensive the life of a prominent politician was: nor did he yet give so much consideration to the advantage of direct political influence on a life-partner. He was younger, and his ambition had not taken on the homespun quality of calculation. Consuelo's eyes had weight then: it is doubtful whether, later on, Lady Clara's eyes or Lady Harriet's had much. When he married Lady Clara he thought a good deal of her father; it is pretty sure that when he was wanting to marry Consuelo he never gave a thought to the late Mr. Alured Dauntsey.

It is assumed that all evolution is upward: if so, the application must be general, to a race, or to mankind at large. The progress of the individual is sometimes less than horizontal. Caradoc started by being selfish: his mother knew it when he was in the nursery, though circumstances, as he was an only child, may have seemed against him. His schoolfellows knew it better, and his Cambridge friends knew it, too, though less explicitly, for the young man was more highly trained than the child or the boy. In political life it was felt by his colleagues, but not much expressed. He ended by becoming so selfish that no one accused him of it at all. The extreme penalty of self-seeking is not shame but

success. Basil began with egoism, and ended as an altruist, though in this story there is no room to trace his progress. In his case, the fault lay in the very abnormal condition of his childhood and early youth. He was not by nature selfish; but for many years he had nothing to think of but himself.

Consuelo began the cure. He was half-ashamed of having in fact proposed to her, for he had no meanness in his self-appreciation: but partly because he was cross with himself for having disturbed her, and also because he knew that she was right — in wishing to marry her, he had turned aside to the Red Mist: had abdicated his purpose of life, and had been willing to indulge himself at the expense of what he ought to make of himself. She had said truly that he did not love her in the way of a lover — perhaps because he had not given himself time — but his love had been genuine, and quite sufficient to knock aside the centre of gravity forever. She had drawn his regard outward from himself and it would never go back.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE frost lasted for nearly a month, and even Uncle Stratford could remember few such seasons: for though the plain is cold enough in winter, it is mostly with the cold of bleak winds: snow is not very common, and, when it comes, seldom stays long. So with the frost: till about Christmas the weather generally keeps "open"; with the last days of December a hard frost often sets in, but in most years it does not hold. A thaw soon comes, then another frost, then thaw again, and frost again, and so on till the roads are rotten. The bitter winds of March are apt to prove the worst feature of the winter. Uncle Stratford had been born in March, and as his birthday drew on each year, he would fall into lower and lower spirits: once it was over he plucked up new courage.

During those four weeks of unbroken frost the drift-snow lay piled about the old wind-mill in a hard mass. The top of the low door was just covered. The sun shone rarely, and seemed only to have gained strength to push through the compact mist-like clouds by afternoon: the effort had exhausted him; there was little warmth in the flat yellow gleam, which came always from the southwest. The door of the mill faced nearly east: and even the surface of the snow never melted till the final thaw came in one night of the last week in January.

So Jocha lay undiscovered and unsuspected in her gaunt tomb. A ray of wan sunlight sometimes shone in far over her head, through the window of what had been the topmost floor, but never warmed her frozen

sleep. In a night of east wind or north there would be hollow rumblings in and about the mill, but the loudest of them did not vex her, though sometimes old Esther Nadder in her cold cottage hard by would lie awake and listen to the noise the gusts made in her chimney. She missed her dead curmudgeon, who had grumbled and scolded so long that it seemed terribly silent now there was no one to find fault with her. She did not miss Jocha, and hardly ever gave a thought to her: she had gone her own way, and it was probably a bad one: the less Mrs. Nadder, who was a decent old creature, thought of it the better. She was in London, where she wished to be, and her stepmother had neither the desire nor the expectation of ever seeing her again.

No one else took any interest in Jocha's whereabouts. Mrs. Nadder had told a crony or two how "queer and werritting" the girl had been after her father's death.

"She were made for naught else, Mrs. Nadder," was the common verdict. "A good riddance she'm gone. Not but what 'twere disgracious on her to be in sech a fume to be out of the 'ome where her mother bored her so soon's as her feather's breath were out on's body. If Lunnun wawnts her, let Lunnun tek her and welcome, 'd say I."

"I doubt she's up to no good i' Lunnun," groaned Mrs. Nadder.

"She niver were up to no good nowheres, Missis Nadder," Mrs. Fitcher reminded her.

"'T must be as Lord O' Mighty wills," observed Mrs. Viney.

They were walking home from Summer Avon church, where the widow had been to show her mourning: it had not been properly in time for the funeral. In the afternoon she would attend Bethesda Chapel to show it there.

Mrs. Nadder had also found something. On the day after Jocha's departure she did not choose to go at once

to work, and must be doing something, so she "did out the place." Old Job had always objected to the process, and she felt rather insubordinate in carrying out her own cleanly wishes so soon after he had lost the power of veto. She salved her conscience by remembering that he had never been buried before; a lot of dirt had been "trapesed" in, on the occasion of the funeral. To do a little "charring" on her own account was irresistible. There was a certain hamper that would undoubtedly harbour mice, and she had often wanted "to be shut of it." If mice came "scrattin" there, now she lay alone, and it under the very bed she slept in, 'twould drive her mazed. So she had it out, and resolved to break it up for "kindlin'." In it she discovered a dirty and worn-out stocking, the very place for mice to breed in; but in the stocking there were thirty guineas.

Esther had never been hard on her husband. His undeniable faults had appeared to her a sort of masculine traits that, for all she knew, might be inherent in husbands of uncommon character. Thirty guineas! His faults assumed a hue akin to sanctity — and Jocha fairly out of the way! No doubt 'twas Providence had sent her off in such post-haste to London. How little old Esther guessed that Jocha was lying snowed up in the old mill, a hundred yards away, with a parcel of more than three times thirty guineas under her back: they troubled old Esther as little as they troubled Jocha, who could hardly have lain so easy week after week, with such a hard lump under her, had not Death made soft her slumber.

Though Job Nadder's widow had so far gone against his known tastes as to clean out the cottage she did not spend his money. She could work still, and the thirty guineas were laid by against the time when she could work no longer: she even paid his memory the compli-

ment of pinching and scraping in feeble imitation of a copy she could never hope to equal: so that when she died, ten years after him, the thirty guineas had never brought her one comfort, or saved her one hardship. She had not been obliged to infringe on them even for the expense of his funeral: his club paid that. For years he had loathed the necessity of paying the club money, but he went on paying because he could not bear the idea of getting nothing out of the club, which would otherwise make a clear profit of him. His longevity was the only extravagance of which he could accuse himself.

During the long frost Seringapatam was in a state of guilty misery and suspense. He had a ghastly secret, and was in hourly terror of somehow being betrayed into letting it out. It never occurred to him that his wretchedness was of his own making, and the weight be removed if he simply told all about it. He did not know that the snow was drifted round the door of the old mill, and every day, every hour, he expected to hear someone say that a woman had been murdered and her body found. There was nothing to take him over there; he had gone once to take Miss Dauntsey back her bracelet, but it was almost the first time in his life he had been to Summer Avon, and he would not go again for any bribe that could be offered him.

They say that a murderer is driven by some horrible fascination to seek the scene of his crime: Seringapatam had done no murder, but he had seen one, and no earthly power would have taken him by day or night within sight of the place.

The longer the crime was undiscovered, the more terrible became his sense of complicity, and his dread of being suspected of knowledge of it. He knew that the passing of every hour and day made it easier, more

certain almost, that the murderer would not be found: of course he would not stay to be caught. Seringapatam was sure that he himself would be held guilty, an accomplice, if it could be known that all this time he had been aware of the crime, and, through his silence, the murderer had escaped. So he held his tongue with ever increasing desperation, though holding his tongue was all his share in the crime.

He had another terror — of the murderer himself. If the man knew where he was, would he not find him and silence him for ever? Not addicted by habit or inclination to prayer, he was ceaselessly praying that the man had not seen him. But he could never be sure whether he had been seen or no. He could only go on praying. He stuck to the village, and never went outside it: he did not know where he might meet the man.

When at last the thaw came the boy's suspense was not increased, because he had never known of the mill's being snowed up. It was only by chance that on the very next day someone went to the place: there was a pile of sticks in it, and Esther Nadder's neighbour in the other cottage knew of them. She thought they would be dry, whereas the melted snow had sodden any sticks she could hope to gather under trees. So she went to help herself and found Jocha's body lying just inside the door, fallen back on the bundle she had been taking with her to London.

When the news found its way to the other valley, and Seringapatam heard it, it was almost a relief: still he thought he had to be more careful than ever, so careful that his mother longed to "dust" him.

"If I'd yore leg," she assured her husband, "'twouldn't lie idle there by the dresser. I'd *dress* him, so I would. What's come to the boy Them alone knows as *made* folk's children, and why They made 'em as They did make 'em."

When the further news came that the man who had done the murder was arrested and safe in gaol, Ser-ingapatam felt a further relief. It was not, alas, out of a sense of abstract justice. Now, at all events, he himself could stir beyond the village street without that horrible dread of a dark man, with shining black eyes, jumping out at him from the hedge. He had not hitherto been cruel beyond the worst of boys: though a jury of matron thrushes and blackbirds might have condemned him. In removing young birds from their nests, and endeavouring to bring them up by hand on a diet of soaked bread, he had but yielded to the impulse of proprietorship in live creatures which may account for slavery and some marriages. But he undoubtedly felt it as a personal benefit when he heard that the murderer had been convicted and was to be hanged. His prayers had evidently not been wasted. It was almost too good to be true: so much so that he could not resist the overwhelming desire to be assured of the truth at the earliest possible moment: he would see the man hanged.

If, during all those long weeks, Basil or the priest had happened to get hold of the boy — but they never even thought of him. Basil was busy becoming a Christian, and the nuns' chaplain was busy helping him.

Sometimes, while the frost lasted, Basil would skate, and sometimes Hurdcott was there, too. But often Basil was away at Avonsbury, in Diana's House, with the priest: and generally Hurdcott was at work. Consuelo skated, and Caradoc, and his mother.

Caradoc made no more slighting allusions to Hurdcott, or Basil, and on the whole his favour with Consuelo increased. He was not precipitate, but he began to feel that he might, before going back to Cambridge, towards the end of the month, say what was now quite in his mind without precipitation.

Lady Caradoc, who was not so clever as her son, did not share this feeling, the existence of which she perceived sooner than he was fully aware of it himself.

"I am glad you like Consuelo," he observed one day. "I remember you began to talk of her the very night I got home for Christmas."

"She was our new subject of conversation. Of course I talked of her. I was sure she would help to amuse your holidays — vacation, I mean. I'm not so sure that I do like her: but, anyway, she doesn't much like me. The best taste is at fault in some directions."

Theodore was aware that in the particular instance implied there were such faults. As to Consuelo liking his mother: well, he could be reasonable. And she would bring him no father- or mother-in-law to like, he must not expect everything. He would not live at Avon St. Thomas, and Consuelo was not to marry his mother. They would certainly not quarrel, and special affection was not necessary. When he had said he was glad that his mother liked Consuelo, he was really about to demand her approval of his choice, not, of course, as if his decision in any way depended upon it. It was a long time since he had asked her permission to do anything, and perhaps he had never required her approval. Now, however, he thought he would say no more; it would be time enough when he had an actual engagement to announce.

Lady Caradoc understood all this very well. If he had asked what she thought of his chances of acceptance, she would have told him "Not much." The more friendly and cordial Consuelo became to him, the less did she seem to his mother like a girl in love, or ready to be in love. She was, Lady Caradoc thought, too friendly by half.

It did not strike that lady as any part of her duty to volunteer her opinion. If Theodore proposed and

was refused, no bones would be broken: there are no bones in the heart. Should it appear that some small hole had been made in his, it would be, at all events, a satisfactory intimation that he had one. But Lady Caradoc hardly thought he would be refused, because she did not believe that Consuelo would let it come to that. In saying that she was not sure whether she *did* like the girl she only meant just as much as she said: she was not sure that she did not. She was a little puzzled, and was not fond of being puzzled: she had never been able to "make Consuelo out." That was all. She liked to feel that she knew all about people, and could sum them up in a phrase: whereas no phrases at her command would serve their turn in Consuelo's case. The least part of the girl was on the surface, and that in so young a person was baffling and tiresome. Lady Caradoc had an idea that Consuelo was capable of doing something queer.

Nevertheless, she admired her, and had an odd sort of respect for her. Lady Caradoc's own speech was not always particularly ladylike, but she was a lady, and knew another when she saw her: though she sometimes declared to herself that, for a girl, Consuelo was too stately, she never had the least doubt of her being, in the best sense and in every sense, a lady. Had it been possible for her to fall in love with Theodore, that young man's mother was sure it would be good for him — though much less sure that it would be altogether good for the girl. But she did not think it possible, and was certain that without it Consuelo would never marry him. Lady Caradoc felt a further conviction that, once Consuelo realized that Theodore had the idea of proposing in his mind, she would stop him in good time for his *amour-propre*. Lady Caradoc had a notion that proposals are not in general the unassisted work of love-

lorn swains: and that young ladies who do not mean to accept need not often expose themselves to the cruel necessity of flat refusal. She thought too well of Consuelo to believe that there would ever be in her case the brutal climax of "No, I won't."

CHAPTER XXXVII

WHEN the long frost broke at last two things happened almost at the same time. The body of Jocha was found, and Uncle Stratford died.

He died as he had lived, with all respectability; and when it came to the point he did not seem to mind as much as he had expected. He had always been shrewd, and he surmised that he had been respected rather for his money than for being respectable: and he knew that his money would gain him no respect in the shadowy realm of which he was about to become a citizen. He still clung to the word citizen, though he could hardly hope to find in the next world a Republic. For many years he had been talking of his own death, and often with tears: the thought of our own vacant place touches the least sentimental. When Consuelo went to see him, as she did daily, he would hold her hand in his, and soon a hot tear would trickle down on it or upon the sheet.

What could she say? To herself it seemed cruel and heartless in her that she should be so strong and young, and he so old and weak: especially as he seemed to care so much about living. Anything she should say must sound like an impertinence. So she stroked his gray old hand, and reproached herself in silence.

"Dear Uncle Stratford," she said once, "I come here every day because I cannot bear not to come: and when I go away down the stairs it seems to me I might as well have stayed away. I can say nothing."

"Ah, my dear! Some have glib tongues in their mouths, yours is in your eyes. You couldn't say more."

Her visit was, in truth, nearly all that he had left to look forward to day by day. And, while she was with him, her presence was a comfort and a sort of support: all the same, before she came he would lie thinking of it with a half suspicion. He had always been alert in that matter: and attributed to it his success in business. No one had ever got on the blind side of him.

He did not in the least accuse her of designs on his money: which, in fact, would all be hers. He rather suspected her of not caring enough about it, which irritated him, while it made him, unwillingly, respect her.

But he believed her to be a Catholic, and Catholics, as he had learned, God knows how, are peculiarly in their element around death-beds. What if she should see him, some day, suddenly grow worse, and pluck out a candle from her pocket, and force him to hold it in his hand till death came? Then he would have died a papist. He shuddered in his warm bed at the appalling notion.

Still he longed for her to come, and when she came these terrors vanished in the clear light of a presence that he knew was noble.

Inconsistent as it seems, he wanted her to talk to him about religion. No one else did. Poor pious Priscilla was too much afraid of him. Amelia thought the subject hardly decent, as too plain an intimation that his death was supposed to be imminent. Athelstan had never talked to anyone about religion in his life. And Uncle Stratford longed for a little comfort. Terrible as the idea of a candle crammed into his hand seemed when Consuelo's visit was only impending, when she was there he was almost cross that she never ventured on religion any more than the others. Catholics, he understood, had all sorts of ways of their own to rob death of his grimness: Uncle Stratford never

wavered in his horror of being juggled into dying a Catholic; if the reader fears we are going to bring about any such end to his life he may rest at ease. Uncle Stratford died unmolested and no candle in his hand dazzled his Protestant eyes with its unwelcome light. But he had a strong desire to filch some crumbs of comfort out of the Catholic basket: and Consuelo was slow to perceive the dexterously hidden workings of his mind.

One day this craving for some consoling word made him more dismally irritating than usual, and his frequent sighs culminated in what was almost a groan.

"Are you in pain?" she asked gently. Her low, clear voice was full of sympathy however few and commonplace her words might be.

"No, my dear. I have no pain . . . but . . ."

"Just discomfort. It is weary lying still in one position."

"Yes, it is, my dear."

Then he fell back into silence. In reality, he had no bodily discomfort. He was cross with her for not doing what, before she came, he had been accusing her of wanting to do. If she knew ways of easing his mind, why would she keep them to herself? Catholics were bigoted, he knew; perhaps they would grudge the comforts they knew of to those outside their pale.

But his old eyes slowly crept up to her face, and he was ashamed. He saw there only sympathy, wordless but tender and eloquent.

"We must all die," he whispered.

For a moment she was too shy to speak; then she said:

"Is it exactly that, dear Uncle Stratford?"

He did not understand her, and she had to go on:

"Is it only a hard necessity? Is it not one of God's kind permissions, too?"

She knew she was awkward and unsuccessful, that what she was trying to say she had not said. Speech had never been her strong point.

The old man listened, more than half querulously. If death were a permission he knew he would not ask for it. She gave up the attempt to clothe in fit words that which she had meant.

"I am sure," she said instead, "there is nothing to be afraid of."

At first he was angry. Why should she imply that he was afraid? Yet he was afraid in a fashion.

He moved impatiently.

"If it was man's invention," she went on, trying to explain her meaning, "we might be afraid of it . . . God's gifts are all kinder than they look."

She could not express properly or in full what was struggling to her lips. How could she — a young girl to an old, old man? She in all the selfish strength of youth, as it must seem to him, he with the shadows he espied askance hovering so close?

"Tell Him, yourself," she whispered in her heart.

Then she tried another word.

"I mean," she said, "it is only an invitation. From a friend."

A blush sometimes reflects itself in a speaker's voice, and her hearer noted something in hers which made him look at her face again. He saw the flush without in the least understanding that she was blushing at her own presumption in seeming to talk like a teacher.

"Ah! But *there is no refusing*," he sighed.

"Only because God knows what He is giving better than we can guess what He is offering."

Consuelo did not grow glib with the sound of her own voice, as so often happens. Her short sentences came with as little fluent ease as ever.

Nor was he quick to accept the idea her few thin

words were straining to hold out. He could not readily think of death as the invitation of a friend: to him it seemed the inexorable summons of a Sovereign who would wait no longer — the conclusion of a long indulgence.

He was disappointed: she had not given him the comfort he had vaguely hoped for — without in the least guessing wherein it should consist. She felt this, and would not tease him by trying to express herself better.

But next time she came he was as querulously eager for help as ever. She perceived it with a kind of cowardly dread, born of her sense of inadequacy.

"Perhaps this will be your last visit," he sighed plaintively.

In this he was wrong. There were to be many more visits. And he did not really believe that he was going to die so soon as his words implied. He had a half-heathenish sense of delaying fate by protesting his expectation of her assault. Her malignant triumph is to steal on those unsuspecting of her approach.

"I am sure it will not," Consuelo answered, and her quiet confidence cheered him.

"It is only a question of time," he persisted; however, she did not say that so it was with her and with everyone.

"I have been weighing your words," he said presently.

"There wasn't much in them, dear Uncle Stratford. I'm not good at words."

"They were good words, though. But — I'm not good."

"God is. That's what matters most. *He* is the judge, not some other man."

Uncle Stratford trembled. He was very slow to pick up comfort from the idea of Divine Perfection, he could only see that it justified an enormous demand. He had

expected a good deal of his fellow-creatures, what must *He* expect? It did not at once occur to him that his own lack of charity had been the hardest proof of his imperfection. So much "goodness," so much right to judge, was the limit of his vision.

"The angels are not clean in His sight," he quoted.

For more than fourscore years Uncle Stratford had been going to church and hearing the Scripture read. He knew plenty of "texts."

"But they *are* angels, and are in heaven."

Uncle Stratford saw there was comfort in this, but he saw a way out of it, too. He did not know much about angels, and was not sure that they were quite as Protestant as they should be: but then they were — by what he could make out, they had *always* been in heaven, without having to get there. They were not a parallel case. Though they were a sort of heavenly fixture it did not exactly appear that they gave entire satisfaction. Divine vigilance might be the more alert on their account.

"I'm not an angel," he observed without intending to suggest any contrast at all humorous.

Poor Consuelo, whose fatal facility was to see the queer side of things, was quite aware of the truth urged against her consolation.

"Nor are any of us. Not even the Saints."

Uncle Stratford had a holy horror of saints. He complained of a draught and Consuelo went to read-just the curtains. He kept his hands tucked under the clothes on her return. Perhaps the candle might be in her pocket after all.

Next time she came he regaled her with quaint sayings of long-dead years: and plumed himself on his dexterity. But when she was gone he felt a flatness as of a barren triumph. He had cleverly kept her off the subject on which, all the time, he wanted her to

speak. Priscilla and Amelia found him very cross when they came, not together, later in the day. Amelia thought it a good sign; there must be a good deal of life in him still. But he was really weaker, there was very little strength left except in his temper.

He knew he wanted to go on living, and that he could not go on much longer. He was afraid of dying and that made him cross, too, for he had not been a timorous man. He hardly asked himself why he was afraid: and did not know without any asking. His life had been decent and upright: he had been an admirer of wealth, though professing to disapprove of it in those who had not earned it; and he had valued himself almost entirely for the measure of wealth he had acquired. But he had gained it honestly, cheating no one, overreaching no one: he had been a hard man to bargain with, but not unjust or underhand. Nor had he been godless: hot in temper he had not been prone to profane speech, still less to foul talking. Without knowing precisely what he believed he had been, as he thought, a believer all his life. He knew next to nothing about God, having had a notion that to think at all intimately about Him would be a liberty, and might easily lead to undesired offence. His attitude was more Hebrew than Christian: though he regarded Jews with conscientious aversion mixed with a queer respect due to their financial capacity and success. That it was right to hold God in extreme awe was about all his theology: and now at all events he found it easy enough to be afraid of Him: armed Omnipotence must be redoubtable to one who is presently to face it.

When Consuelo came again he did not entertain her with reminiscences. He even forced himself to a confession, and told her, quite meekly, that he had wished her to speak to him about religion, while he had prevented her from speaking about it.

"Not any particular religion, of course," he explained nervously. Consuelo did not quite understand, but said how much she would like to cheer him, if she could:

"But I'm not very capable," she added; "even when one knows what one thinks it is difficult putting it into words. And one's own ideas are not likely to seem worth much to others."

It was not precisely her own ideas the old man wanted to know: he had an inveterate belief in some occult knowledge, not Personal to herself, which she as a Catholic had at her disposal. But how could he ask for this? He was visibly irritated when she rather timidly suggested that a clergyman might be more helpful than herself. How could a clergyman know anything about it? Uncle Stratford's ideas were the reverse of sacerdotal, and he regarded a clergyman as a dull layman in black who drew tithes—which was rather unfair as the tithes of Summer Avon and Middle Avon had for many years gone into his own pocket. And Uncle Stratford was at the moment worried about his sins: he had not the smallest intention of alluding to them to a clergyman. For a moment he almost suspected her of wanting him to *confess!* not that he supposed there existed any Protestant Minister so abandoned as to allow any such a thing: still in her Catholic ignorance she might not be fully aware of the free brilliance of Protestant enlightenment. That Catholics were benighted he was impregably convinced in spite of his other equally strong belief in their having ancient, inherited items of knowledge which he wanted to get hold of. Thus Europe, equipped in the latest fashion of science, looks down on the changeless, unprogressive East, and credits her with occult scraps of traditional lore not yet rediscovered in the West.

At last Uncle Stratford with immense difficulty got

himself to the point of asking Consuelo to say to him what she would say if — if — if it was someone of her own faith who was drawing near his end. She did not protest that she and he were of the same faith: for she could not truly say that. As Basil had said she was to all intents and purposes a Catholic.

“Not, not of course,” the old man added, “about priests and confession and that.”

“I could only say,” she said simply, “think as much as you can of God and as little as you can of yourself.”

Uncle Stratford listened, even eagerly. Nevertheless, he was disappointed. Like Naaman he wanted to be told some great thing.

“One must think of one’s sins?” he suggested.

“So as to repent of them, yes. After that as little as possible. They are part of oneself: it is better, once they are repented of, to think of God — they are no part of Him.”

He had forbidden her to speak as to a Catholic even while demanding it. She tried to comply with his demand and his limitation.

“But,” he urged, “I don’t know whether I’ve repented or not. I don’t know that I know what they are.”

This she certainly could not tell him.

“God knows. Ask him,” was all she could think of to say.

Uncle Stratford pondered: he knew that his “temper” was amiss: but he was not ready to admit it to her: because he had shown it to her.

“Business,” he said presently, “has been my occupation in life. Perhaps I’ve been too much taken up with it.”

“Perhaps. Pleasure is some people’s occupation in life and they are too much taken up with that.”

"Still I've acted fair: I've not been unjust," said the old man, willing to justify himself after his recent admission.

"Yes. I'm sure of that."

She could not tell him that perhaps his injustice had laid in thinking only of "business" and nothing of the one great business of us all. Poor girl, she *could* not preach. The old man's thoughts wandered. The word "business" naturally brought to his mind the result of it: he could not help loving his success. And now he could not help showing her how much *she* would profit by it.

"I cannot take my money where I'm going," he said, with a sigh that would not be stifled. "But I'm doing the best I can with it."

He knew it was a poor second best. *She* would not value it as it deserved to be valued.

"That is all one can do," she answered gently — but with a sudden dread that he was going to leave his wealth to some hospital and defraud poor Athelstan and the aunts. They neither complained of poverty nor spoke of it but she knew they were poor; with what he could leave them they would be well off and the property could be freed from every incumbrance.

For a few moments the old gentleman lay still fondling the hand he had taken: he was making up his mind to tell her. It was very difficult: never in his life had he let the vaguest hint escape him as to what he intended to do with his money. But he wanted to be thanked: if he put it off he would be gone where the expression of her gratitude could not reach him.

"It will all be yours. I've left it all to you, my dear," he whispered at last.

She drew her hand away, not intentionally, but because she could not help starting back in her chair.

"No, no! You *must* not," she cried. "It would be horrible."

He was startled by the sound of her voice, and looked at her face. He saw that she was simply shocked: and it almost frightened him. She was usually so gentle that her tone of vehement protest made him feel that had he not been weak and dying she would have shown herself plainly indignant and angry.

She put back her hand at once, and took his into it.

"Dear Uncle Stratford," she said earnestly, "I am sure you will not do that. You have been just all your life: you will not begin to be unjust now."

She already spoke with all her old gentle tenderness, but without the least hesitation or diffidence. Here at all events was something she knew it was right to say.

"You said," she reminded him, "that one must think of one's sins. It would be a sin to do what you thought of; and you could not repent of it if you left it done. Repent of it now. That is a plain duty anyway."

If she had spoken of her uncle and aunts his obstinacy and opposition would have been roused. That she did not do, and did not think of doing. What he should do with his money it was not for her to tell him: but she had the right to tell him it must not be left to her.

"I have plenty of money," she said; "more than a girl needs."

"Five hundred a year!" Uncle Stratford observed half scornfully. He knew all about her income. It had seemed to him almost too much for a girl till he began thinking of her as a peeress. For years he himself had had less. It is five times what my aunts have," she replied. Uncle Stratford made a queer face.

"Your aunts will never marry. They will always live on here, and never want more."

"Neither shall I ever marry," she answered, not with a girl's disclaimer, that means nothing, but with a firmness that disconcerted the old man.

"It will be your own fault then," he said crossly.

"Fault or misfortune," she declared laughing, "I never will."

Though he was annoyed he believed her. She was not a person whose statements one could easily brush aside.

He was really fond of her, and much fonder now than he had been four or five weeks ago when he made his new will. But he had not left her all his money merely because he liked her. Whether she could have persuaded him to cancel that Will had he still believed she was going to marry Basil I cannot tell.

"Have you and my lord quarrelled?" he asked quickly. He would hardly have dared to say this had he given himself time to think it over.

She made no pretence of not understanding what he meant, or who "my lord" was, and answered frankly, "We are better friends than ever. I do not think he is much more likely to get married than I am."

This rather puzzled Uncle Stratford — but he said reproachfully, "I'm sure he was ready to get married a while back, I didn't want you to go to him empty-handed, lord or no lord."

"I see. It was very kind of you but it would not have been fair. And I don't think it would have made any difference to him or me. If I had been willing to marry him I should not have thought how much money I could take with me: and I am sure he would not have cared."

Uncle Stratford could not understand it, but he did perceive quite clearly that no marriage between Lord Winterslow and his kinswoman was going to take place.

"You've seen a lot of Lady Caradoc's son lately,"

he remarked significantly. Uncle Stratford did not admire Mr. Caradoc.

"Yes," then Consuelo laughed again. "If I had to marry one of those two gentlemen," she said, "I would promise you it should not be Mr. Caradoc. But I will promise more — to marry neither of them."

An awful surmise huddled itself into Uncle Stratford's mind. "Oh, my dear, my dear! You're not going to be — to be . . . a NUN." He almost wailed.

"I've never thought of it," she answered with another laugh. "Why do you put it into my head?"

Her tone reassured him. On the whole the somewhat animated discussion had stimulated his vitality, and done him good. Before she left him he had made up his mind to send for the lawyer and make a new will. When Priscilla and Amelia called in the evening he was far more amiable than he had been for weeks. He was still more benignant on the following evening for the lawyer had been with him in the morning and the Will under which Consuelo was to have everything had been cancelled: in the new one Uncle Stratford left her "his love and gratitude." The rest was divided equally between Athelstan and his sisters.

"My dear sir," the honest solicitor said in taking his leave, "this visit has been much more pleasant to me than the last."

Uncle Stratford growled, almost in his second manner, for he had had three like Rafael. But he was come to the point when honest human approval was not worthless to him. It might be an earnest of approval in higher regions.

"That's your opinion. I shan't pay you for it," he declared facetiously.

The lawyer was in his own estimation elderly, in Uncle Stratford's, youthful; there was a good twenty years' difference in their ages. The two old fellows

grasped each other's hands. "You needn't pay me for drawing this new will either," the lawyer protested. "If I wanted the money I'd send the bill in to the young lady we've been disinheriting. I've seen her, sir, and I've heard of her. She'd not grudge the price of engrossing this bequest of your love and gratitude."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

So Uncle Stratford could be amiable when his nieces came to see him; they no longer irritated him as they had done during those weeks in which he had had the secret knowledge of having treated them shabbily. His temper improved altogether, for he was easier in his mind. Consuelo had hit close when she entreated him not to begin being unjust now at the end of his life. He knew well enough he had been unjust in making that will in her favour: it had been sheer worldliness and ambition.

During the few days that remained to him he hardly talked so much to the girl but he listened more, and could listen with a mind opener to her meaning. He knew now that what he had always called "the end" was very near; and when all uncertainty was over he did not mind so much. It is the clinging to hope that embitters the approach of death. Agag knew very well what he meant when he said, "Surely the bitterness of death is overpast": though few that quote him seem to know. There was no hope for him in the face of the stern prophet.

The young, who feel themselves immortal, are often shocked to see how the very old shrink away from death. Consuelo had only recognized in Uncle Stratford's tenacious hold on life the vigour of a wonderful constitution: it was the last flicker of his bodily strength.

He had given up expecting anything wonderful for her: perhaps he no longer felt the same need of learn-

ing some patent fashion of dying in spite of a wrong unrighted.

"God has been very merciful," he said to her. "I have been given so many years of life."

He sighed, as if he had come to the end of the gift, as if it were all used up.

"It is only the little first half that you have finished," she said; "the best half is just beginning."

She herself comforted him more than any words of hers. Simple as they were he could barely understand them. But he could understand her. Love explains itself.

The irritable remnants of physical strength were quickly ebbing away, and a merciful fatigue crept into their place.

"No, my dear, there is no pain," he told her; "none. I am just tired."

"When I was little I used to be always begging to sit up," she said, "and I was often so sleepy that I had to hold my eyes open with a finger on each eyelid. All the same I made a grievance of being taken to bed. My father used to carry me off, and I scolded him all the way upstairs."

Uncle Stratford listened, with a smile: he liked to think she had been naughty.

"I can't hold my eyes open much longer," he said presently, "though I have been asking to sit up so late."

He gave a little laugh to show he had understood her.

"When He sees you are too tired your Father will carry you up," she said, stroking the old gray hand that showed so dark against the white sheet.

When he spoke next Uncle Stratford asked her, almost suddenly, why she loved him.

"I can feel it," he said. "That's why I am always

waiting for you to come. But I don't understand it. Why do you?"

"Because God made me."

In the long wakeful night he thought this over and grew to understand it: at the time he did not.

"We were made like Him," she went on. "As long as we go on loving that much likeness is left. When we give up loving the last trace is lost."

Early on the following morning Uncle Stratford's old housekeeper came into his room to bring him tea: if he was asleep he liked to be wakened. To-day there was no need: after over ninety years of sleep, he had awakened.

The long frost had ended, the thaw had come in the night. On the day following Jane Bundy, Esther Nadder's neighbour, found Jocha's body and would certainly have fainted had she known how, and had there been anyone there to see. To faint, unobserved, with the ground "all in a smatter" with melted snow would be a mere extravagance of emotion. The next best thing was to break the news, which she began to do at once by setting off down the garden patch at a wavering trot "Shraiking," as she afterwards stated in her evidence, "all the ways."

"Miss Nadder (diseased's second widow)" she stated to the Jury, whom she addressed collectively as Your Lords, "were in the Skillen, wi' a few scroffs in her apern, jest gethered for kin'lin'. . . ."

Mrs. Nadder came to the door of the park-house, to see what ailed her neighbour, and Mrs. Bundy could only "grasp out,"

"Jocha! I've seed her. . . . Oh — Missis Nadder, prepare yoursen: she's up i' the ole mill."

The widow supposed for a moment that her step-daughter had come back from London, and was certainly upset by the news: but she could not understand

why her neighbour should scream over it. A terrible suspicion occurred to her that Jocha had somehow got wind of the thirty guineas and was come to claim a share of them.

Mrs. Nadder had grown fond of her guineas and was not now disposed to part with any of them: but the idea of having to defend them against Jocha's rapacity set her trembling.

"Whatever can she ha' come back for!" she cried feebly, to show that she had no suspicion of the reason.

"She beant coom back! She've niver bi gone away. . . ."

Then Mrs. Bundy, as she informed the jury, told Mrs. Nadder that Jocha had been called "to her last on account."

The terrified widow did at length understand that her step-daughter was lying dead in the Mill.

The women were too much frightened to go there: Mr. Farmer Joy came riding up the lane on his dapple cob, talking to his foreman who walked alongside, and to them Mrs. Bundy told her story. They went to the mill and found that it was true.

By the time Consuelo heard of the murder there was much more to be told. The dead girl had been lying all these weeks just inside the door of the mill, a bundle under her back which was small enough to be quite light, but inside the few articles of clothing it contained was a parcel of nearly a hundred guineas. Robbery, therefore, could not have been the motive of the murder. She had left the cottage just before eight o'clock, and ten minutes earlier two lads had met Hurdcott on the highroad: they had given him goodnight and he had answered but as if unwilling to stop and talk: he had turned up the short lane leading to the two cottages and the mill; if he had gone to the mill

he would have reached it in five minutes. Mrs. Bundy saw him go there. Fearing there would be snow she had gone out into her garden to bring in some clothes off the line and had seen him pass along the low hedge within a few feet of her; there was a little moonlight, not much but enough to enable her to recognize him, especially as he did not walk at all like the other young men about. Three or four minutes later Jocha had gone towards the mill also, and Mrs. Bundy had understood there was to be a good-bye meeting. She knew, of course, all about them. Then she had gone back into her cottage and thought no more about it. Within a few yards of the door of the mill a knife had been found which was well known to belong to Hurdcott; it had in fact belonged to his foster father, Cormac, before him.

Two things were well known in the village: that Hurdcott had been paying for the dead girl's child, in obedience to a magisterial order: and that he had from the beginning bitterly protested his innocence. It was also generally believed that he regarded Jocha with abhorrence.

Meanwhile he was not to be found.

That afternoon Consuelo, who had now a horse of her own, rode over to Dace Court, and met Basil on his way to see her.

"I was coming to you," he said. He could see by her face that the news had reached her. Of course it would be likely to reach her first, but he had thought that perhaps they would have kept it from her.

"I promised to turn to you," she answered.

They had met quite near the house, and said nothing more till they reached it. At the door he bade her go in, and took the horses round to the stables. In three or four minutes he was with her again. She was standing by one of the tall windows looking out on the

sunlit garden, and little path beyond it: it was like a day of spring, and the silly birds were singing.

"You know why I came," she said.

"Yes. He has been here. He told me himself."

Basil saw her lip tremble.

"What?" was all she could ask. Even that she could hardly make audible.

But before he could answer she had steadied herself, and turning her eyes full on his she said, "Wait before you say anything. No matter what they bring against him I do not believe he did it."

"I do not know what they say. I heard of it first from him. He has told me how much there is against him. Do you know it?"

"I think so."

He saw her trying to speak, and how even the few words she could force between her lips hurt her. He made haste to give her the only relief he could.

"He says that everything points against him. But he did not do it."

"Did you think he did!"

"No."

She held out a cold hand to him, not coldly, and he was thanked. A long sigh broke from her.

"Consuelo," he whispered, "let me say something."

She turned her deep eyes to his, and gave him leave.

"I cannot pity him."

Her head moved a little; but she could not ask him why; it was too hard for her to make words.

"Whatever happens to him," Basil answered, "he will know what is greater than anything that can happen. What he could never have learned any other way."

"Yes," she said simply, understanding him and making no pretence of not understanding. "I love him."

It seemed to both of them as natural that she should

tell this truth now as if the man she loved were dead already.

For a while they stood silent, looking out on the pale blue sky and the sunlit meadows where the spring seemed forestalled.

"Tell me what he told you," she asked at last.

He told her. How the dead girl had pretended that Hurdcott was the father of her child. That never in his life had Cormac's son ever fallen into any such sin. How then in truth he had grown to hate her. Then of his first meeting with Consuelo herself and how she had changed him, so that all his desire had been to be less unworthy that she should now and then speak to him. So that he had simply put the hateful memory of Jocha out of his mind. How she had come back from London and sent for him, threatening to tell her lie to the ears that he would not suffer to be fouled with it. Of her alternative — that he must bring her three guineas to take her back to London to the old Mill at eight o'clock that Monday night; and how he had raised the money by selling the only thing he possessed of any value — the thick gold medal that had been about his neck when Cormac found him. A Jeweller in Chalkminster had weighed it and given him five guineas for it: and he had gone to the mill and given her the whole sum. When she had the money safe in her hand she had laughed at him and said it was easy to guess where he had got it: she had thought or pretended to think that Consuelo herself had given it to him. The wretched girl had then spoken insultingly of Consuelo, and he could not bear it. But he had simply turned on his heel, though his blood was boiling, and had left her, hurrying quickly away that he might hear no more. He had never seen her again. As for the knife they had found it was likely enough to be his though, of course, he had not seen it, for he had come straight to Basil.

He had certainly possessed a knife with a fairly large blade that was very sharp; it had been Cormac's. But he could not have dropped it while talking to Jocha for he had not stayed five minutes with her, and the knife had been safe in his pocket. He had, indeed, used it afterwards, on the first day of the skating: while putting on his skates he had noticed that one of the leather straps was too long and he had taken out the knife and cut off the end of it. When Basil had called him to come and teach him Hurdcott had forgotten to put the knife back in his pocket, and had left it on the bank. He took his skates off at another place and never missed the knife till he was undressing to go to bed: then he made up his mind to go and look for it next day: when he did go the knife was not to be found, nor the bit of leather he had cut off with it, but there had been a further fall of snow in the night and Hurdcott had not felt sure whether someone had picked it up, or whether it was hidden somewhere in the snow. Unfortunately Basil had not seen him using the knife, and the matter was too trivial for Hurdcott to mention to him. How the knife could ultimately have been found close to Jocha's body he could not possibly guess. About a week after its loss another man had asked him for the loan of it and he had simply said that he had lost it.

Consuelo listened with a tense attention and Basil knew that nothing was lost on her. She never took her eyes off the sunny fields outside, but she hardly saw them. What she saw was the cruel weight of evidence.

She believed in Hurdcott, not because he said he was innocent, but because she knew he was innocent for she knew *him*. Basil also believed in him, and for the same reason. Who else could?

"It was when you and I saw first him and then her near the old mill on the day we were riding back from

Avonsbury, that they had met and she had told him to bring her money or she would tell you about the child. . . .” Basil went on.

“She had told me already; long before.”

And Consuelo told him of their meeting at Dogbury Ring.

For a time then both were silent; thinking of the callous, squalid malignity of the murdered girl: and thinking also, all the while, how everything had knit itself together against the man accused of her murder. There was almost nothing but his word in favour of his story: he could prove the sale of the medal, but even that he had actually given the money to Jocha could not be proved.

A parcel, securely tied, of guineas was found under her, but no vestige of the five he said he had put into her hand. That she had been killed with a knife was certain, and that Hurdcott’s knife had been found open close to her. There was only his word for it that he had used this knife afterwards.

“Where is he?” Consuelo asked at last. “You said he had been here: is he here still?”

“No. I believed in him. And I saw that everything was against him. I urged him to get away, and offered to help him. He refused instantly. ‘If I ran away *she* might think me guilty,’ he said simply. He has gone back to Summer Avon.”

All this time they had both been standing up and even now he hardly liked to beg her to sit down: what was the use of idle forms of courtesy? He knew that she could not sit still. Her face was always pale with a clear healthy pallor. She was white now, so that her black hair and eyes seemed darker than ever: once she shivered as if she was cold, but put out her hand to stop him when he moved forward to shut the window.

But she stood erect, and never swayed; he knew she would not faint.

"You promised to come to me if trouble reached you," he said presently, "and now that you have kept your word I am no use to you."

He was thinking how he had said, that fate must be blind if fate should strike her: blind or no, he thought, fate could see well where to aim her blow. To strike Consuelo someone else must be attacked. He had still his heathenish feeling about fate, and was conscious of an inward fury against her as he saw these two helpless, innocent creatures caught up in her toils for wanton destruction. Before the end it had ceased to seem destruction and he could read in it a making not a spoiling.

When he said that he was no use to her, she gave him a little smile that seemed to him a child's whom one tried to soothe by soft words and caresses when one is powerless to salve pain.

The truth was she was not thinking of herself but of Hurdcott, and Basil knew it was so. Had she been thinking of her own trouble she would not have been Consuelo. He had not the least soreness of jealousy. He had learned from her all she could teach, and thought no longer of himself but of her and Hurdcott. He also had moved forward, and stood on a higher plane than in the time, that seemed already so far away, when he had thought of making love to her.

She had said simply that she loved the man whom everybody was accusing of murder: of marriage and giving in marriage she thought as little as Hurdcott could himself.

To say that she did love him, had merely seemed to her a plain debt to truth as soon as she knew it. All this Basil read as clearly as if it had been written;

and he was sure that she would tell Hurdcott himself what she had told him. That also would to her appear a mere debt.

"Neither you nor I," she said, "can be of any use, as you call it."

He saw she had no hope that Hurdcott would be acquitted. Neither had he.

Presently he said gently.

"Consuelo, I do not wonder that you love him. I do, too. He is, as you said long ago, like no one else. No words can express it. To-day he was more himself than ever. You know I would not pretend to believe him innocent, to please you. I could not see him, or hear his voice and not believe in him in spite of any evidence."

It did not occur to either of them that Hurdcott would impress others in like fashion. And what would it matter?

"Evidence" has nothing to do with such a belief as theirs, nor any such belief as theirs to do with "evidence."

"Where will they take him?" Consuelo asked presently.

"To the gaol at Chalkminster I suppose."

"I must go there."

He did not say her nay.

"I will take you," he promised.

CHAPTER XXXIX

WHEN Hurdcott was admitted to the prison they asked him of what religion he was. He had never had much religion: he hardly knew what to answer. Cormac had been a Catholic and had always told him that he must have come of Catholic folk or the medal would not have been so carefully hung about his neck.

He told them he was Catholic, and a warder whose home had been in Avonsbury said there was a priest there. The governor of the prison sent to the priest and he was with Hurdcott when Basil and Consuelo arrived. That was on the day following the discovery of the crime: on his way back from Dace Court Hurdcott had been arrested.

He and Basil had only parted a few minutes when the latter met Consuelo. Hurdcott was still walking through the shrubbery towards the little wicket-gate leading out into the downs. He walked quickly out of habit and because of his definite purpose to go straight home to his lodgings where he could be found by those who wanted him.

But he never reached home: he had just gained the spot where Jocha had told her lie against him to Consuelo, when he was arrested. Living she had accused him falsely with her tongue: dead she accused him falsely with her murdered throat. Neither accusation had been believed by Consuelo: both were believed by everyone else except Basil and a little later the priest.

He had been going towards Dace Court, and when word of it came to those in search of him they set off

to take him: they were coming over Dogbury Rings when they saw him coming towards them: had he been looking up he must have seen them, but he was walking with downward eyes and saw nothing but Consuelo and Basil. It would have made no difference if he had seen them and known who they were. They crept down into the hollowed space and towards the gap in the ring where Jocha had been sitting when Consuelo found her. There they waited till Hurdcott appeared when they jumped out on him, and made him prisoner.

He stood still while they clapped handcuffs upon him, though his face flushed and he said impatiently:

"I know. I was going home where you could find me."

It was urged against him afterwards that before the charge of murder could be brought he had shown his expectation of it.

As he went with these, he did not note how lovely was the sunlight on the free land; of outward signs and sounds he heeded nothing. Of his own certain fate, for he had no doubt about it, he thought: for he could not think of Consuelo and forget it. All his desire and purpose had been to change himself so as to be less unfit for her to think of. This was the end of all his efforts. Nay, but it should not be. He had hoped to become worthy of her loyal thoughts of him: to *seem* worthy. All hope of seeming was gone. There is something else: he would *be* worthy, though he should be outcast from her mere opinion. To die innocent and be called guilty must deserve something, and there was a harder thing that he would do. He, too, thought how Jocha had accused him falsely in life and in death. To bear no grudge or hatred to her memory, how hard it was! The hardness made it worth while. Till he felt no grudge and no hatred he could not feel himself in very truth innocent.

When Basil and Consuelo arrived at the prison the former sent in his card to the Governor, who sent word that he would see Mr. Hungerford at once. The warder who brought the message was talking as he came to the chaplain, and Basil went up to him and briefly explained his errand.

"I cannot leave this lady here," he said. "Is there some waiting-room where she can sit while I see the Governor and obtain permission for both of us to see the prisoner?"

"Yes. I will show you."

The warder took charge of the two horses, and the chaplain led them indoors to a room where he said he would wait with Consuelo, if she would allow him, while her friend went to the Governor.

Basil thanked the clergyman and mentioned his own name.

"You are Lord Winterslow?" the chaplain asked, looking at the young man with a stiff but not unfriendly interest.

"No," Basil answered simply. "I am not. I am Basil Hungerford as I told you. My father would have been Lord Winterslow if he were still alive. The House of Lords has decided that I am not — the news only reached me yesterday and I have had other things to think of."

He went away to see the Governor and presently came back to say that they might both see the accused man. He thanked the clergyman for his kindness and held out his hand.

"I knew your father," said the chaplain, "and you, too, when you were a baby. My name is Justin Filmour: I was in charge of a Mission Station in India. Let us meet again: now you must, I know, be going."

Very old memories, not void of reproach, were moving in the clergyman's mind: he took Basil's hand and

shook it, still stiffly but with a certain warmth; at the door another warder was waiting to lead Basil and Consuelo to Hurdcott's cell; as they followed him Basil said to her:

"But for that clergyman I should have been brought up a Christian."

Some such thought was in Mr. Filmour's mind at the same moment. Though he and Basil's father had never met again after their quarrel on that Christmas night over twenty years ago he had heard how the hard and obstinate man had disinherited his son of his Christian birthright. And when Basil came to England Mr. Filmour heard of that also, and how the young man was "some sort of Oriental heathen." That his uncle should succeed to the title and estates of the family, seeing that he was a Christian, seemed to the clergyman better and more fitting than that they should be held by this young man: nevertheless, he could not understand it: for he had no doubt that Basil's father and mother had been married legally, though in Mr. Filmour's eyes such a marriage, between a baptized man and an unbaptized woman was no sacramental marriage at all. Mr. Filmour was sure that the House of Lords would not regard it from his point of view. He was certain that according to all civil law Basil Hungerford was Leonard Hungerford's legitimate son: why then was he not heir of the estates and title that would have been Leonard Hungerford's had the latter been alive?

Outside Hurdcott's cell Consuelo and Basil found the priest from Avonsbury: for a month Basil had been spending long hours with him on at least half the days in each week, but Consuelo had never seen him since their first meeting.

"I thought," he said, "that you two would rather see this poor lad alone: so when the warder came up

and said you had been given leave to see him, I came out. I have already been a long time with him."

"I would like to see him quite alone at first," Consuelo answered simply. "You and Mr. Hungerford can come in afterwards."

The warder was inwardly filled with surprise that a young lady should be willing to trust herself alone in a locked cell with a man who had lately murdered a woman. But he made no difficulty since both the gentlemen seemed to think she must do what she chose. The door was unlocked, and locked again behind her after Consuelo had gone in.

The cell was not at all dark; the walls were white and the sun shone in through a small barred window high up under the stone ceiling. There was a smell of whitewash and sawdust with which the floor was sprinkled. The furniture consisted of a wooden bed, a stool fixed to the floor and a sort of flap table fixed to the wall.

Hurdcott was sitting down with his back to the door and did not turn round: he was reading a book the priest had given him. When the warder had come up to say that there were two other visitors for the prisoner he had called the priest outside and told him there. Hurdcott, when he heard the door open again thought it was the warder himself.

Consuelo, before the noise of the locking of the door behind had ceased, went forward the two or three steps that took her across the cell and laid her hand on his shoulder. In a moment he had turned round to her: and jumped to his feet.

"I never thought I should see you again," he exclaimed; and the few words struck her like a blow: hopeless as she was for him they seemed to make the hopelessness worse.

"Did you not know I should come to you?" she said.

"I never thought of it."

He never took his eyes from her: and there was no need for her to flush from their admiration. It was *her* they worshipped; her beauty was no more to him than it was to herself.

He could hardly believe that she was there. Her presence was like a prison-dream of freedom from which the prisoner dreads to awake.

"How could I know there was anyone so good?" he said.

She watched him with a wonder that held her silent. Of the doom hanging over him he had lost all memory. That he was a prisoner, with no hope of release, he thought of only as it bore reference to her goodness in coming to him. He wore no hideous gaol-clothes, but his own ordinary dress. She could hardly believe it was all true: that his life was nearly ended; that all his strength and vigour and youth would avail nothing against death hurrying to him inexorably: that in truth he stood there, tall and straight and stalwart and yet dying as certainly as if he had been weak, and worn with long life, as old as Uncle Stratford had been.

Slowly she began to shake, and felt a cruel gripping at her throat, a scorching in her eyes: crushed tears hurt most. She durst not drop her eyes from his lest the tears should fall. She must speak or he would see how her lips trembled.

"Do you not know?" she asked, stretching out her hands to him.

He saw that she could barely hold herself from weeping and the thought that it was for him gave him a proud wound: his own eyes filled, with joy and pity. But he never thought her hands were for him. They seemed like a child's piteous reaching out of hands for help.

"Ever since we first met," he told her, "I have been trying to be different. It seemed wrong you should speak to me and I be no better than I was. That was all I thought of: to go on changing and changing till it should be no shame to you to say a word to me when we met now and then by chance. Then this came: and it seemed finished. That part of it. You could not go on thinking of me. But I could go on trying — in here — to be less unfit for you to think of. And now you have come here, and are sorry for me. You would not come if you believed what seems against me."

"I should come if I *knew* it was true. But I *know* it is untrue."

She could only speak at all in short, sharp phrase: but to him they seemed unearthly snatches of incredible music.

"Even Basil knows it is not true," she said. "And I — Do you not know?" she ended repeating her former cry of appeal.

How could he know? She saw he did not. None the less she would tell him. That one thing she could do for him she would do. There was nothing else.

For once her eyes had dropped; but she lifted them again, and with them all herself.

"Do you not know why I believe in you?" she asked, as bravely as ever woman spoke.

"Because you are good," he said proudly.

"No. Because I love you."

It was not she who blushed. Why should she? To tell this truth seemed to her all the duty she could pay him. Rank and girlhood, all the little matters of life, what were they in this shivering shadow of death? Again her small cold hands were stretched out to him, and he held them, trembling.

"I am ashamed," he whispered.

"That I should tell you? I had to tell you."

"That I am only what I am."

"God made us both."

"Only such a God as that priest tells me of could make you."

She knew that he was worshipping her: she knew now that he had always worshipped her. Nevertheless, it did not trouble her as an idolatry: behind her was something greater, to which this worship of herself would open his heart, whence his eyes would draw their dawn of sight. She had tried, because bidden, to do a sort of preaching to Uncle Stratford, and had failed: she could not try again here.

They stood silent: neither of them had glib tongues quick to lick up the surface of expression off little shallows of meaning.

She had said what she had to say, and he had heard. He did not need to make her say it over and over: no repetition could be more than the undying echo sounding in his heart till it ceased to beat. Neither did he tell her that he loved her. It did not seem to him that what she had said gave him a right he had not before. Her coming to him, her saying that she loved him, did not bring her lower down but lifted her higher above him than ever.

Nevertheless, she had raised him also: no one seeing him would have thought he looked like a man under a horrible accusation which he had no hope of being able to dispose: for which in a few hurrying weeks he would suffer.

He had never looked so manly, so free. There was no taint of the prison-cell about him. His bearing had lost what once marred it—the absence of self-respect, the consciousness of being as he had confessed good for nothing. The shadow of death in which he stood, consciously and yet not now adverting to it, was not a shade but a light, blent with another warm light

of indescribable elevation and elation. It is a wonderful thing to be proud and not of oneself. And he was proud, not of anything in himself but of her.

She saw the light and had an awe of it: divining and yet not fully comprehending. This man, reprobated already by hundreds of vulgar tongues, to her seemed sacred and apart; his ignominy a halo.

They were lovers, if ever God made any; but no love passages were ever theirs, then or to the end. He held her small fingers in his, lightly, nor did he once press them with his own: or draw her nearer to himself: nothing could bring her nearer. Yet he did not hold her hands awkwardly with clownish shyness, as if he would have dropped them if he might.

It may seem that now the thought of death, of such death as was claiming him, must have grown more intolerable to him. Life would now mean what he had never dreamed of. But it was not so. He was not thinking of death or life: only of her: if he could have wasted thought on anything but her he could only have felt that death would never part them, life must.

At last she spoke with her mouth.

"There is one thing," she said. "Something you must do to please me."

How, in his outcast poverty, could he do anything for her!

"You are to call me by my name."

"'Consuelo,'" he said. He had never forgotten, though even to himself he had not once thought of her by it.

"Ah!" she cried, smiling. "You say it like a Sicilian."

"Is it Sicilian?"

"No; it is a Spanish name. But you say it as I always heard it, as if you had a Sicilian tongue."

She paused, still smiling: and it seemed like a reflection from the light on his face. Then she said:

"Say this: after me word by word. Let me see if you pronounce this also like a Sicilian: it is not first rate Italian."

And he said it after her, word for word.

" 'Madonna mia! Ti amo, ti adoro
Per te e vita 'venuta d'oro.' "

"Just like a Sicilian," she exclaimed triumphantly.
"I knew you would."

"What does it mean?"

"Oh, it doesn't mean much. The old jangle came into my memory: it was all I could remember at the moment."

"What does it mean, though?"

"I will tell you if you say 'Consuelo.'"

"What does it mean, Consuelo?"

"It means,

" 'My lady! I love thee, I worship;
Through thee my life is become golden.' "

"And 'Consuelo' means Consolation, you told me."

CHAPTER XL

THE reader is not to fear a detail of all the tedious process or processes that ended in Hurdcott's conviction and sentence. There were three separate trials as it seemed to himself: for the Coroner's inquiry and the Magistrate's appeared to him trials, ending as each did in a verdict of wilful murder. Finally there was the real trial at the Assizes which did not take place till May, weeks after his arrest.

There were witnesses not mentioned in this story, and items of evidence: but what has been said in four words as to the charge against him constitutes the main issue and backbone of it all.

The jury was pretty much what the time and place would be likely to produce, and they were no doubt "indifferent honest." None of the twelve had any personal prejudice against the accused man, for none of them had ever seen him till they knew of him as the supposed murderer, and knew also that no sort of suspicion attached to anyone else. But the fact of there being no other subject could not but simplify the matter in their eyes. It must hamper a jury when suspicion lies vaguely divided between two or three. As it was there was the plain fact of the crime, and a great deal of evidence against the accused of whom, if they had never heard any great evil before, they heard nothing very good now.

He was an alien of unknown origin, brought up by another alien who had been guilty of homicide in his own youth. He had a poor record for industry, and had held bad company with poachers and the like. He

had behaved badly before towards the girl he was now commonly spoken of as having murdered: for after getting her into trouble he had meanly denied it, and turned against her, so that in the village it was now affirmed that he had hated her like death for months and months. Nevertheless, he had had two secret meetings with her: for the shepherd, whom Basil and Consuelo saw near the old mill on the day they rode back from Avonsbury, had seen Hurdcott and Jocha go to the place and leave it. It was generally assumed that the meetings had been of the young man's contriving. He could not support his own story as to being summoned to the first by a note for he had burned it, and had mentioned it to nobody. He said a gypsy child had given it to him in the road, at a place he mentioned, but the gypsies were gone away, and no one had seen him receive it. Neither was his story believed as to the object of the second meeting, the fact of which he denied no more than the first. He would only say that the girl had written to him to meet her at the mill, and, when he went, had demanded three guineas to take her back to London. He said nothing as to the threat by which she had extorted his compliance. He could prove that he had sold his gold medal, but he was not believed when he stated that he had given all the proceeds to Jocha: she had only asked for three guineas, and it was absurd to think he would give her five, when he was known to dislike her, and made no pretence of having wished to give her any money at all.

Basil had been anxious to bear witness as to the truth of Hurdcott's assertion, but Hurdcott's counsel declared that it would be useless, and would be disallowed as evidence, seeing that Mr. Hungerford could only swear to a statement made by the accused himself weeks after the crime, and after its discovery. He was, in fact, determined to help Basil out of the wit-

ness-box, for Basil had told him all he knew, and the man of law was not at all anxious that cross-examination should bring out any mention of the day on the ice when Basil had noted the look of abhorrence cast towards the very scene of the crime by the man accused of committing it. On that occasion also Hurdcott declared he had still his knife and had cut off it the end of a skate-strap, but he simply said no one had seen him do this. It would not help matters at all if it should appear that Basil had been quite near and might, as the jury would almost certainly conclude, have seen the knife and its use if what Hurdcott asserted were true.

"No, my lord. We will keep you as far from the box as possible. It would be obvious that you are strongly prejudiced in his favour — and all the same obliged to give evidence that would tell against him."

This meeting took place in a waiting-room of the prison, after Basil and the prisoner's counsel had just left his cell. As the barrister ceased speaking the door opened and Mr. Filmour walked in.

"Please do not call me that," Basil was saying, "I am not Lord Winterslow."

It seemed to him a trivial matter, when their business was with affairs of such different moment: but Mr. Wylie had now addressed him as Lord Winterslow several times.

"Why not?" Mr. Filmour asked; he had been about to withdraw with some apology when he found the room occupied.

"Because the House of Lords declares it has no cognisance of the marriage of my parents."

There can be few things less easy for a man to say than that the legitimacy of his own birth is impugned: and Basil said this with a slight flush, but with a plain unashamed directness that made the barrister feel more

than ever kindly to him. The clergyman also felt bound to respect rather than pity him.

"Of course, they were married," Basil continued. "But the circumstances were peculiar. My mother was not a Christian and the first marriage was according to Buddhist rites: afterwards they were married in the small station chapel near our home. It was quite private; besides the clergyman there were only two witnesses, the clergyman's wife and his English clerk or sexton. Everyone concerned is dead. Before coming over here it was suggested to me that I had better bring with me a certified copy of the register and I went to the chaplain at present in charge of the mission station and asked for one: the book was produced in my presence and there was certainly no entry of the marriage. It seemed to me that one page might have been removed; for the last marriage recorded at the foot of a certain page bore a date so much further removed from that of the first on the following page than seemed to have been usual: but the pages were not numbered: no motive for the removal of the page suggested itself."

"Hm," observed Mr. Wyllie.

"Do you remember, Lord Winterslow . . ." the clergyman was beginning when Basil quietly begged him also not to address him by that title. But Mr. Filmour was still obstinate.

"I call you by the title that I am sincerely convinced is yours by English Civil Law," he said. "Of ecclesiastical law there is no necessity to speak."

"None whatever," agreed the barrister.

"Do you remember — it is unlikely enough — what the last entry was of which you speak as being at the bottom of a certain page, and leaving a considerable gap in time before the next marriage recorded at the top of the page following?"

“ I do remember both: for I was studying the place in the register carefully. The entry at the foot of the page was that of a marriage between two Europeans, Henry Ferguson and Elspeth Grant: it was performed by the Revd. William Wallace Ferguson; the following marriage was between two native Christians and was performed, Mr. Filmour, by yourself, in 1799, nearly two years after the date of the last entry.”

“ Lord Winterslow,” said Mr. Filmour, “ Mr. Wallace died in the spring of 1798 and I succeeded him in charge of the mission-station a few weeks later. I was in charge of that register till I removed to another station in the first weeks of 1800. I examined it often and with care: and I can swear positively that I have read in it the record of your father’s marriage not once but many times. I remember the entry concerning the marriage of Mr. Hay Ferguson very well: he was my predecessor’s son. The entry concerning the marriage of Mr. Leonard Hungerford came next, at the top of the page following, and was also in Mr. William Ferguson’s handwriting. The first entry I had to make myself came next, so that you will readily understand that the immediately preceding entry could not escape me even if I had not been used to study the book.”

“ Mr. Filmour,” sighed the barrister, “ I only wish you could be a witness for the defence of my poor client here. You understand evidence thoroughly! My Lord, I shall continue to use that title in spite of you! The House of Lords, you will see, will reconsider your claim. Mr. Filmour’s evidence is absolutely material. A very pretty case indeed — out of my line unfortunately. But you should retain Mr. Pettigrue: he is invincible in these cases. He might suggest to your lordship that there *may* have been a motive for the removal of the page.”

"Only one person could have a motive," Basil observed gravely.

"Quite so! Quite. A romance of the peerage," agreed Mr. Wyllie, rubbing his amiable white hands with an unction.

"Mammon!" observed Mr. Filmour, with solemnity.

"It really does not matter in the least to me," Basil remarked diffidently, for instinct warned him that he would be disapproved, "whether I am called Winterslow or Hungerford. The latter was my father's name, and I should not care to see it disgraced."

"But, my *good* sir!" cried the barrister, forgetting the "lordship" in genuine stress of emotion. "The lands and the title go together. I'm a Chalkshire man, and know all about them — ten thousand a year if it's sixpence."

"I am sure," Basil answered, "that no one will try to touch the money I have from my mother. I am her legal heir anywhere. For the first marriage was in Burmah by Burmese rites . . ."

"Ah, a very, *very* pretty case!" sighed Mr. Wyllie. "But ten thousand a year! Ten thousand a year to reward conspiracy and . . ." He pulled himself up, with a sense of the uselessness of incautious utterance.

"And Justice!" observed Mr. Filmour. "Fiat Justitia ruat cælum."

Basil laughed.

"I should be sorry for the heavens to fall on my account," he declared; "who could tell what would happen next? Falling heavens must injure more persons than one."

Mr. Filmour thought this flippant, and showed that he did.

"My dear lord," the barrister, who didn't mind so much about flippancy, protested, "ten thousand a year

is not to be sneezed at. You'll be marrying one day." (Mr. Wyllie had seen Consuelo.)

"When I do I shall ask for the ten thousand a year."

"I should ask for it first, and ask for the lady after," the barrister observed pleasantly.

He was not much oppressed by the fact that they were all three in a prison: and his disposition was to good-humour and cheerfulness. To Basil it seemed uncanny to be poking fun in such a place. Mr. Filmour was not given to poking fun anywhere, and he could only think of the topic of their discussion with solemnity. He was a rigid, very just man, and because justice demanded it of his conscience he had told what he knew. He was not more aware than Mr. Wyllie that the removal of the missing page from the marriage register suggested a crime; but to him crime was primarily sin: to the barrister it was chiefly a matter of illegality. Mr. Wyllie had not the least idea that there were people in the world to whom ten thousand a year was no great object. Mr. Filmour was able to perceive that Basil really did not care enough about money or rank to allow himself to be disturbed by the possession or deprivation of a title and certain considerable estates.

The three gentlemen left the prison at the same moment; the barrister stepped into his carriage: Basil had left his horse at an inn and walked thither, Mr. Filmour asking permission to bear him company, as his way lay in the same direction.

"I hold the living of St. Thomas of Canterbury," he explained, "as well as the prison chaplaincy: my house is near your inn."

"It is strange," he observed presently, "that we should meet here again. Of course, you could not remember me."

"No! I was too little at the time you and my father fell out."

"You know about that?"

"Oh, yes. But for that Christmas dinner I should have been brought up a Christian."

The clergyman stiffened a little.

"I said what seemed to me right. Truth has always seemed to me more imperative than tact. But the result to yourself I have deplored for many years."

Basil could see that the man was altogether honest and conscientious, and he remembered his father very well. If they had quarrelled, the fault need not have been all on one side.

"You would be glad to hear that I *am* a Christian: let me put an end to your trouble on my account. I was not brought up a Buddhist: I was taught no religion at all. I found out a sort of Buddhism for myself: but I am a Christian now."

"Thank God for His mercy," murmured Mr. Filmour, with devout relief.

"You know the young priest who comes to see poor Hurdcott? He received me into the Catholic Church yesterday."

"Oh! did he indeed," the clergyman observed, with something short of enthusiasm.

CHAPTER XLI

As Mr. Wyllie drove home in his neat shut carriage he was not troubled by the disagreeable wind that sent straws and ragamuffin scraps of paper running round corners of the streets; and being comfortable and good-natured, he felt quite a sympathy for the chilly-looking minor canon whose hat blew off just as the poor gentleman made a sort of gulp at it with one of his bony red hands. He was quite pleased to see that the hat was quickly stopped in its illicit course by a boy of country-fied appearance who restored it to the minor canon with a dispirited air.

“Rather unnatural boy, though,” thought the plump barrister: “when I was his age I’m afraid I should have let it go on for the fun of seeing the parson running after it.”

Meanwhile, the minor canon was profuse in sincere thanks to the unnatural boy and man with a wooden-leg who was his companion.

If Mr. Wyllie could have caught that boy and kept him at his side in court during even one hour of the Assize he would not have had to accept defeat.

As it was he knew nothing about it, and thought no more of Seringapatam than he thought of the minor canon’s hat. He was not even thinking of his client, of Hurdcott that is to say, for he had, of course, more clients than one: though a natural connexion of ideas presently brought the accused man to his mind, for at the moment of the minor canon’s misfortune he was thinking of Basil. He had taken quite a liking to the young man, and was sorry to find him even odder than

he had suspected. Miss Consuelo Dauntsey was apparently odd also: but she was a beautiful girl, and quite out of the common: once comfortably married her oddities would round off. Like Uncle Stratford the barrister thought it would be positively unfair to her if Mr. Basil Hungerford did not get himself into legal possession of his title and the ten thousand a year of which he spoke so foolishly.

"Perhaps they've had a tiff, *amantium iræ* . . . when the wind changes he'll change his tune."

Mr. Wyllie was able to perceive that Hurdcott was also out of the common: but it is not certain that he liked him the better for it. It did not justify his belief in the young man's innocence. Though he had not the least intention that either Consuelo or Basil should appear as witness he knew all they might have said there: that in fact had decided him. In his opinion their evidence would suggest an additional and stronger motive for Hurdcott's supposed crime than the too plausible one already assumed. Had this not been his view of the facts he would not have spared to put either or both of them into the box, however it might have gone against the grain. He was a Chalkshire man himself, of good family, and would have disliked very much the necessity of subjecting either of these young people to the unfortunate chances of cross-examination in a murder case: but his profession was more to him even than his class: and his client's interest, and those of legal justice (on his side of the case), would have come first. Do cowards for the defence ever flatly ask themselves whether their clients are guilty or innocent? My belief is that they seldom do so. But they must weigh all the evidence and know its force: and Mr. Wyllie attached very great force, indeed, to the evidence against Hurdcott.

And there was scarcely any to weigh against it. If

only an alibi could have been proved! but Hurdcott himself could only say that after he had given Jocha the five guineas, and left her, he had walked fiercely away over the downs, where he had met no one. From the time he had been seen by Jane Bundy going towards the mill no human being had seen him till he walked into his lodging nearly two hours later.

Mr. Wyllie had, of course, been often in Hurdcott's company by now: and more than once, though less frequently, in Consuelo's: only once had he happened to see them together. But he was sure that his client was consumed by a romantic adoration for her: and he knew that Jocha had spoken brutally of the young lady to the man who worshipped her: the jury must not know that. We have said that Hurdcott struck his counsel as out of the common; but it by no means affected him as Consuelo and Basil had been affected. It gave to his mind a far more complete explanation of the crime.

Mr. Wyllie dressed with uncommon care that evening. A very personal man, hardly elderly, though his daughter considered herself grown up, he was always neat. But to-night something like splendour was required. There was a ball at Bemerton House, and Lady Tarly had invited the barrister and his family. Miss Alethea Wyllie was to "come out" at it.

Consuelo and her aunts were also invited: which the two elder Miss Dauntseys thought very polite in her ladyship.

"I'm sure it's so long since we went out," Priscilla had observed; "it was uncommon civil in her to remember us."

As a matter of fact Lady Tarly had not exactly remembered them, but her son had reminded her of Consuelo.

"She couldn't be expected to recollect that we were in mourning," Amelia considered, "Uncle Stratford's

name being different, and she wouldn't read the local papers you may depend."

Neither of these ladies cared to go to a ball on their own account: but they were proud of their niece and would have been glad of such an opportunity for her to be seen: besides young people like dancing.

"Poor Uncle Stratford! It's very unfortunate," Amelia added.

Priscilla sighed meekly and her sister further observed that after all a grandmother's uncle was almost no relation at all.

"And it isn't as if he'd left her anything."

Priscilla shook her head at her knitting.

"I must say I was surprised," Amelia confessed. "He seemed so taken up with her. And I know the lawyer was with him, the week after Christmas: I met him coming out and he seemed queer. 'Depend upon it,' said I to myself, 'Uncle Stratford's left her Alured's share and the man thinks we'll grudge it her.' Fifteen thousand added to what she had would have made her an heiress as you might say."

"I shall leave her half mine, and the other half to you," Priscilla declared with a readiness that showed she was not now thinking of the matter for the first time. "And I'll leave her all mine: so she'll get thirty thousand in the long run."

It did not occur to Amelia that she ought to have said she would leave half hers to her sister. Priscilla had assumed an elder's privilege of dying first and Amelia thought it quite reasonable.

"I wonder," she said presently, "whether she'd go to the ball if Lady Caradoc took her. Poor Alured's dead now over half a year."

They agreed to hint at this arrangement to Consuelo herself.

"I think," Amelia remarked, "Lady Caradoc would

be glad enough to take her. They've never been very thick, and I fancy my lady suspects Consuelo of quizzing her. But she's good-natured in her way, and an elderly lady likes to go into company with a young one for excuse: and then Consuelo would do her credit: she'd dragoon all the young men to dance with her."

"Consuelo would not like that at all."

"No, and she wouldn't put up with it. But she could hold her own and keep her ladyship in hand. I must say if Uncle Stratford had not died I should have liked to see Consuelo dancing myself."

But nothing on earth was farther from Consuelo's mind than affording anybody the opportunity of seeing her dance. When the idea was rather timidly suggested to her by Priscilla she showed at once that it hurt her.

"Poor child," her aunt observed to Amelia afterwards. "She doesn't talk much about her father: but she frets for him more than you and I thought for."

To tell the truth Consuelo was not thinking of her father when she gently but with grave decision refused to think of going to Lady Tenby's ball. Hurdcott was already committed for trial at the assizes, the Coroner's inquest having found a verdict of wilful murder against him. What had she to do with merry-making? After she and Basil had already been several times to the prison the Governor one day sent a message to say he would be glad if Mr. Hungerford would come to him before he left. He and Consuelo were at the moment in Hurdcott's cell, and the young priest was there also. Basil at once went as requested, and the Governor received him courteously, as usual, but with some constraint.

"I am sure," he began, "you will understand that I am willing to do all in my power to oblige you and — and Miss Consuelo Dauntsey. Nor would I desire to deprive your unfortunate protégé of any comfort —"

"He is not my protégé, he is my friend," Basil interrupted quietly.

The Governor tried not to raise an eyebrow, but he could not help thinking it odd that a young gentleman who ought to be a peer should select his friends from among the criminal classes.

He made a rather rigid little bow and said:

"Of course his trial has not yet taken place: and he *may* be acquitted: but, I should deceive you if I pretended to expect it."

As the Governor paused Basil said:

"Neither do I expect it. I can only hope against hope. But his final condemnation will make no difference. He will be no more guilty than now. He will still be my friend."

This struck the Governor as sheer nonsense. To be *found* guilty was to *be* guilty. He grew a little less tolerant.

"Perhaps," he observed, adjusting his neck-cloth, "I may already have somewhat stretched my prerogative of decision as to the privileges accorded to this unhappy young man."

He smiled as if the idea of there being any limits to his prerogative were a quaintish conceit, but the smile was tight and not suggestive of mellowed feelings towards his prisoner.

"I have permitted him several indulgences," he went on, as Basil merely bowed and listened. "In place of wearing the . . . the distinctive dress of this — place, in fact, he is allowed the rare privilege of wearing his own, if I may say so, habiliments. That is in deference to your influence."

"I am most sincerely grateful."

"And he has a cell to himself: even now, since his committal to trial."

Basil again expressed his cordial thanks, with not a

hint in his manner of remembering that the privilege was paid for. But the Governor remembered.

"And I of my own motion, before I even knew that he had powerful friends, caused a priest of his, as it were, persuasion to be sent for. That priest has free access to him without let or hindrance."

The Governor paused to be thanked a third time and Basil did what was expected of him, but perhaps with less fervour than before. It is never easy to go on expressing gratitude with freshness, and it seemed rather a matter of course that a man should have the ministrations of a minister of his own religion.

"You also," the Governor went on more stiffly, "have been constantly admitted to the young man's cell, and that I shall continue to permit, though — though —"

"Though what?" asked Basil with trepidation, wondering if after all the permission were in danger.

"Though (you will, I trust, excuse my even suggesting by a sort of implied inference such an impossible idea), though there is, of course, nothing but your condescension and kindness to draw you to take interest — no — no tie of blood — pray excuse me again."

"Unfortunately he has no relations, that is why."

"Certainly, certainly. Your goodness I appreciate: and the young lady's also. But you are, if I may so put it, at least a male: the young lady is — is, I'm sure I say it with all respect, a female."

This Basil was not prepared to contest.

"And — and in fact her visits are not so admissible as your own. If there were any plea of relationship . . ."

"Of course there can be none."

"Precisely. As there can be none I am afraid I cannot let it be supposed that I accord in Miss Dauntsey's case the permission conceded in your own."

"You wish me to tell her this?"

"If you would be so good."

Basil was grieved for Consuelo's sake and for Hurdcott's. But he could not think the Governor's decision harsh. The good gentleman was wordy and a little pompous, but he had really done more than many others would have done at that time: Mrs. Fry had already been at work for years and other ladies were now following her example in visiting prisons, but their visits were to female prisoners. Basil would not pretend that Consuelo came as a mere philanthropist.

"I will tell her," he promised: and as he rose to go he again thanked the Governor with grateful sincerity.

When he got back to the cell, he said at once for what.

"Does he mean," Consuelo asked, "that I am not to come again?"

"I am afraid so."

"Tell me exactly what he said."

When Basil had obeyed her she lifted her eyes to Hurdcott's face and a little blush crept up her cheeks. Then she turned to the priest.

"Will you marry us?" she asked in her low clear voice. For a few moments she was not answered. The priest was thinking more of her than of her words: and it was so with Hurdcott and Basil also. None of them found it easy to speak.

"It is the only way," she said steadily. "They will let me come then."

Hurdcott's eyes were full of that pride in her that looked like personal elation.

"No, Consuelo," he said. "It is too much."

"It is nothing at all," she answered.

Then she looked again at the priest and repeated her demand. "Will you marry us?"

He found it hard to speak in level tones like hers. He did not think her crazy as the reader may: to him

the world meant very little, its conventions and its judgment. He knew these two poor creatures loved each other as few do who swear it: and as she said it was the only way left by which they could avoid utter separation. He knew Hurdcott was innocent, and it seemed to him that almost everything was due to a man about to die for a crime he had never committed.

He told her gently that there were difficulties: she was not Catholic and Hurdcott was, a dispensation would be necessary, for instance.

"It is a matter of names," she answered. "Basil knows I am a Catholic in belief: I do not need instruction. Examine me if you like. Then receive me into the church: and there need be no dispensation. Afterwards marry us."

"You mean *now!*"

"Yes."

She reminded them that otherwise she could not come back: "Do as I say," she urged steadily, "and then I will see the Governor and tell him we are man and wife."

In all quiet seriousness she meant it: and she had her way. There in a corner of the prison cell she knelt and confessed, and professed her faith, and was received into the church of which she had always been, in all but name, a member: afterwards Hurdcott and she were married. Then she asked Basil to take her to the Governor.

CHAPTER XLII

THE Governor received her somewhat awkwardly, but he was a gentleman and behaved like one.

"Would you mind," she asked, "if I saw you alone?" The Governor was not sure that he did not mind: but he could not say so, and Basil went out.

"You have been very kind," she said as soon as the door closed. "I have never been able to thank you."

"It is a privilege to be able to please you. But I fear you are come to ask me what I cannot grant."

"I am come," she answered, "to ask what you can grant, and what I am sure you will."

The Governor moved uneasily in his seat. He really did not know what she might ask in vain.

"I ask," she went on simply, "to be allowed to visit my husband until he die."

He was not young, the Governor; his own daughter was older than the girl opposite him: and he had never been emotional. But as he heard her, and saw her, a lump was in his throat, and very slowly two tears began rolling down, one on each side of his pompous Roman nose.

He was not able yet to think of the merely astonishing nature of the information she had given him. He had been a man long before he became a prison Governor. He could only think of the human tragedy.

"Your husband!" he almost groaned. "Until he dies" were the words he was thinking of. He saw that there was no hope in the girl who had used them of any issue but death.

“Yes, I am his wife.”

He could not disbelieve her: no one in her life ever failed to believe anything she said. Otherwise it seemed merely incredible. He knew something about her and had heard that on her mother's side she came of a family of princes. This he had remembered very well when refusing to permit her continued visits to his prisoner: he had inwardly plumed himself a little on his refusal to allow himself to be influenced against his duty by her rank. He had not thought much then of *her*. He did not forget her rank now but he was thinking more of herself. In age she seemed to him almost a child, yet she was not childish, but a grave woman sitting mute in the very shadow of death.

He could think nothing derogatory of her, even while what she asserted astounded him. It was a singular tribute to what she was that this prosaic, worldly man of narrow sympathies and dull appreciation should respect her more or less after she had said that she was Hurdcott's wife — the wife of a really nameless founding stranger, foster-son of a shepherd and himself a peasant: it was more remarkable still that now the Governor could hardly remember her husband's crime, but only the tragic penalty he must pay for it.

The Governor fumbled for his spectacles and in adjusting them contrived to intercept those two slow tears before they had trickled far.

“My dear!” he began. His manner was not so official as he might have wished had he been able to attend to it. He spoke pretty much as if she had been one of his own girls. He paused for he really did not know what he was going to say.

“Ah!” she said, “you are very kind.”

It seemed as though she were sympathizing with him, and he had wanted to comfort her. She was thinking

how often he must have to look close on the sorrowful shadows of life.

It came into his memory that Basil had been far from hinting at any relationship between her and the man she was not to be allowed to visit.

"Mr. Hungerford—" he enquired; "does he know of what you tell me?"

"Yes. Only he and the priest who married us do know."

"Not your own relations?"

"No! I had to do what I thought right myself; the only harm my marriage could do them would be for it to be known. They need never be troubled by the knowledge of it. No one need know. I had to tell you."

"You may be sure," the Governor told her, "that from me no one shall know."

"I do not want you to think," she said simply, "that I am ashamed of being married to my husband."

The Governor stretched out a rather gouty hand and touched one of hers with it.

"My dear," he assured her, "I am sure you could do nothing to be ashamed of. I do not understand the strange thing you tell me: but I am sure of that."

Consuelo's biographer may have failed to revive her picture, by his own incapacity to construct a likeness out of what has been handed down to him: but the reader must feel that in her was something beyond power of written description, since she could by the force of what was in her elicit such testimony as this from such a man.

She ascribed it to his goodness. It was hard to put her thanks in words which had never been her ready servants. But she tried and he was satisfied.

"It would be," she said earnestly, "a great wrong and injustice to my husband if I let you think that, be-

cause of anything that may happen to him, of what has happened already, I should be unwilling to be known as his wife. I am proud of it. If I stood quite alone, as, alas he does, but for me and two other true friends, if I had no kind relations to be thought of, I would ask you to tell everyone that we are man and wife. I would, if they let me, sit by him in the place of his trial and share his trouble publicly, as I share it privately. As it is, now that my duty to him is done by marrying him it seems to me that other duty, to my relations, has to be fulfilled, and that for their sake I must hold my tongue, and deny myself the liberty of doing what I wish."

"I am sure you are right. And . . ."

"And you will allow me to visit my husband constantly until . . . until the end?"

He gave her leave almost without speech. With her last words came back in bitter force the full recollection of what the hurrying weeks must bring to her. When she rose and thanked him he held her hands between his own and bade God bless her.

"He has," she answered.

It was when she got home that she found her aunts serenely elated by Lady Tenby's card of invitation to her ball.

CHAPTER XLIII

WHEN Consuelo told her aunts that she had been received into the Catholic church they were not much taken aback for they had supposed her to be a Catholic all along. The chief difference it made so far as they were concerned was that she went no more to church with them but rode over to hear Mass on Sundays in the nuns' chapel at Avonsbury.

On the last Friday in April Hurdcott's trial took place and ended as everyone had foreseen, in his condemnation to death. According to the law then in force the execution followed the sentence on the day next but one, but if the sentence were passed on a Friday then it was carried out on the Monday following.

Basil and the priest returned from Court to the prison with Hurdcott, and the former was immediately summoned by the Governor who informed him of what has just been stated.

The Governor's manner was full of kindness and consideration.

"I do not know," he went on, "if you are aware of how the law stands as to the disposal of the remains of one who has been executed." He saw that Basil did not know and told him, with considerable difficulty.

"The body must either be dissected or hung in chains," he said. "That is the law. But it *has* been evaded: and shall be evaded now. That is all I can do for that poor child."

He did not say that it was in fact a great deal: but Basil understood: such evasion as he spoke of had not probably been with the connivance of the Governor of

the prison in which the condemned persons had awaited execution. It was pretty certain at all events that no such connivance on their part had ever been admitted by themselves.

The Governor had now an unpleasant task in explaining to Basil how the evasion of the law was to be carried out, and into those particulars we need not enter here. They amounted to this, that the body was to be bought by Basil himself from certain surgeons, and the Governor had to make him understand that this must be done at once.

When Monday came you would have said that it must be market day, at least, so many carriers' carts stuffed with country folk were making their way into Chalkminster from the villages on the plain. There was a white mist and it was generally held that only those who arrived in time to get places quite near the gallows would be able to see very well. But perhaps the fog would have lifted by noon.

Early that morning, Consuelo, her husband and Basil received Holy Communion together in Hurdcott's cell. After their thanksgiving, Basil rose from his knees and went out, the priest going with him.

Hurdcott and his wife knelt on. Presently the warder would bring the condemned man his breakfast of bread and water, the only food allowed them between sentence and execution.

Hurdcott rose to his knees first, and bent over her.

"Consuelo," he said, "it is not good-bye. Life could never have done more for us. Death cannot part us."

His hands raised her from her knees.

"Nothing can do that," she answered.

Suddenly he asked her something that had been often in his mind. "Have you forgiven *her*?"

She knew at once he meant Jocha.

"I have never thought of her for weeks," she answered simply. "She never meant to kill you. *That* lie is not against her."

He saw that Consuelo had no grudge against the girl whose death had demanded his.

"I am ashamed for having doubted," he said.

The clock of the church hardly began to chime the four quarters; when they were finished it would strike eight, and the warder would come.

"You are *sure* you wish me to go now?" she asked him.

She had asked to stay those other four hours, but he had begged her not.

"I am sure. Basil will take you back to the nuns and be here again in time. It is only eight miles each way."

He held her still by both hands and felt that they did not tremble. Her great courage filled him with pride in her. He never thought of his own.

One of her hands he lifted to his lips and she dropped to her knees and kissed both of his.

"Consuelo!" he cried, his face aflame.

No other kiss ever passed between them. Their union was not of this earth, but of the spirit that outlives it.

The warder's key grated in the lock, and again he lifted her from her knees.

"I shall come soon," she said. And he saw on her face a light: one would have said a fore-shaft of dawn. Yet there might well be fifty years of this present life before her. When the door opened she was ready to pass out, as the warder and the priest came in.

In the stone corridor outside Basil was waiting for her, and together they went along it, and down the white stairs in silence. She walked beside him, not leaning upon him. She was not thinking that she would never see her husband again — the years in front were for

the present meaningless: it seemed to her that she would see him quite soon. He would be above her: this unearned death must be counted for martyrdom like that of the Innocents of Bethlehem. Never once had the least breath of complaint fallen from Hurdcott to her, to Basil, to the priest, to anyone. His plain, manly patience and serenity had impressed the judge who passed sentence on him, and had filled with a certain discomfort the jury who had found him guilty, though jury and judge alike thoroughly believed he had committed the murder. In his heart the judge felt sure there must have been some provocation stronger than the evidence suggested. But it must be remembered that there were still almost two hundred capital offences according to English law, such as personating a Greenwich Pensioner; and in condemning him to death the judge not only did what the law required but did it without any misgiving that hard measure was being dealt out.

As for Consuelo, she *knew* her husband was innocent, by a knowledge higher than any certainty mere human evidence could have given: that human evidence she was never to hear.

At the prison gate they did not find the chaise that had brought them, and the priest from Avonsbury, where Consuelo had heard Mass the day before and that morning, and whither she had gone back to sleep at the convent the previous night, after spending many hours in Hurdcott's cell.

The chaise belonged to one of the Avonsbury nuns, and the driver, who realized his importance as having brought in the priest who was to assist the condemned man on the scaffold, had found himself treated almost as an official at the tavern when he had been baiting his horse! So that he was a few minutes late in arriving at the prison door.

There was not a crowd, for the execution was not to take place here but in the market place. Only a few groups stood about, staring at the blank walls. Basil and Consuelo had nothing for it but to wait. He could not leave her alone, and did not know from which direction the chaise might come.

They did not speak. Consuelo stood wrapped in her thoughts, scarcely observing any outward thing.

Presently a man knocked on the little door in the huge iron-studded gate and was uncordially admitted. Basil paid no great attention to him, merely noting that he had a bad face: he was tallish, and rather slim, with black, shallow eyes, and black hair, and a swarthy yellow-brown skin. Consuelo never saw him.

He was the executioner — and a volunteer. As it happened, there had been a difficulty, concerning which Basil knew nothing. The legal theory is that death sentences are carried out by the sheriff himself: in fact it is done by his deputy, the hangman! But on this same day there was an execution in London,¹ and the hangman could not come. The sheriff, almost at his wits' end, offered ten guineas, and that is a large sum to a labourer earning seven shillings a week: but no labourer came forward. The sheriff offered fifteen and still no working-man would earn the money at such a cost. Only on Sunday night had it been whispered to the sheriff that a gypsy fellow volunteered, and even he made his conditions: his name was not to be enquired, and on the scaffold he was to be allowed to wear a crape mask.

They had not waited five minutes before Basil saw the chaise coming up the straight bit of road from the town; at the same moment he caught sight of a man with a coffin on his shoulder on the footpath quite near to them. At the prison gate the man halted and knocked.

¹ That of Thistlewood and four of his fellow-conspirators.

Consuelo was raising her eyes from the ground and Basil made a low exclamation which caused her to look up quickly. But his attention was given to the man with the coffin: her face was turned another way and before she had time for anything else she saw something which caused her to start forward into the street.

Among those who had come in from the country to see the great business of the day was the woman who had charge of Jocha's child. After to-day she meant to throw it on the parish. It was now a little toddling thing of nearly three years old, and heavy to carry. She had walked in and was tired of the weight: just opposite the prison she had stood still to gaze on the place, and set the child down. A gossip came along and the two women were chatting.

"I do declare! There, if my shawl ben't come unpinned," cried one.

"Let me 'elp 'ee," said the other. "There's naught looks carelesser than a crookit shawl."

The little girl saw a bit of gaudy-coloured paper half way across the street, and toddled out adventurously to get hold of it. A huge farmer's waggon with four tall and well-fed horses was coming along, full of sight-seers, at a surprising trot: the waggoner was dallying over his right shoulder with the lass in blue ribbons just behind him.

It was at that moment that Consuelo looked up and in the same moment she had dashed forward to save the child. The mist had made the road slippery.

"Mind the child!" cried the girl in blue ribbons, and the waggoner was in time to jerk his horses to the left without altering their pace. The child crowed triumphantly and could not understand why her affectionate foster-mother shook her as she caught her up.

"Oh, the lady!" someone shouted. But too late for the waggoner. The lady's foot had slipped on the

greasy ground, and the heavy wheels had passed over her before her husband's coffin had gone in at the prison-gate: before Basil could save her.

No one who saw her dead could think she had suffered any pain. On her face was still the strange light that Hurdcott had seen upon it. It was not he that had to wait.

CHAPTER XLIV

At the convent at Avonsbury the nuns were waiting for Basil to bring Consuelo to them. She was to stay with them over the next day, early in the morning of which, immediately after Mass, the body of her husband was to be buried.

For many weeks they had been praying for Hurdcott, but not by name. The priest had simply begged their prayers for one accused of a great crime of which he was innocent. On Saturday morning he had by Consuelo's desire told the prioress all he knew.

In their choir the nuns sat praying for the man who was to die at noon, and for Consuelo, whom they now knew to be his wife. About nine o'clock they began to expect her arrival but it was afternoon before she came: and husband and wife were together. The priest brought them: Basil had gone to tell Consuelo's relations. Later on they lay side by side on one simple catafalque before the altar of the nuns' chapel and one by one they came and prayed beside them. On the dead man's breast, too, the priest had laid the thick gold medal he had worn so many years. The priest had bought it from the jeweller to whom it had been sold; at the trial it had been shown, and then given back to him.

It is not likely that the reader would remember one casual word of the chaplain's on the day Consuelo and Basil had visited him at Diana's house. He told them then that it was necessary he should talk French for all the nuns were French except one. That one nun who was not French came with the others and knelt by the

catafalque: it was terrible to her; she was of a timorous nature, and knew how these poor things had died. She was glad that a light linen cloth lay on the dead man's face. She hardly looked at him as she prayed. As she rose from her knees she saw the medal on his breast.

A low cry burst from her, and perhaps she would have fallen had not the prioress, who was next behind her, caught her tenderly in her arms.

"Oh," the nun moaned, "who is he?"

It was not there the prioress told her all she knew; she led her from the chapel to her own cell, and gently repeated what the priest had told her.

When the prioress had finished Sister Lucia begged to see the medal again and it was brought.

"I knew it the moment I saw it," said the nun. "The arms are those of my mother's family: she hung it round my neck; and I put it round his. Dear mother, he was my son."

The two women, half kneeling, half sitting on the floor, Sister Lucia told her story.

"'You hardly know my name,' she said. 'The names we had in the world are nothing to us here, and the few letters I have ever received have borne no other in the address than my name in religion; and I am older than you — was here before you came. I was called Assunta Carbone; not a noble name. My father was a rich innkeeper in the town of Termini not far from Palermo, but my mother was the elder daughter of the Marchese Campodolce, of a good family but poor and decayed. He had another daughter, not so beautiful as my mother, married to the Duca di Monterono. I shall have to speak of them, that is why I mention it. A young noble, handsome and pleasant, used to come to my father's inn, for sport in the mountains. I did not know then who he was, but I will tell you at once. His father was a cousin of the King, and had taken up

revolutionary ideas, or was supposed to have done so; so had the eldest son, but the second son, the one who used to come to our inn had not, though he also was suspected. The Court used then to be almost always at Naples, and because they were out of odour, this prince and his sons chose to live chiefly in Sicily. The one who came to my father's house called himself simply Don Ferrante, and I had then no idea who he was. Whether my father knew I cannot tell but I think he did. Don Ferrante fell in love with me and I with him, and we were married very privately, but quite correctly, except that he consulted none of his family. Whether somehow or another news of the marriage was carried to some high quarters I do not know: but very soon all sorts of troubles came. My father was accused of revolutionary conspiracies and treason and carried off to prison; my mother was long dead; my husband was not with me, and I was alone. I did not know what to do and went to my aunt, the Duchessa, who received me but was very harsh. Her husband had just been appointed First Secretary of the Embassy of the Two Sicilies in London, and they were at the point of leaving Palermo. They brought me with them to England, and on the way I found that my aunt knew of my marriage. She knew more than I did, for she knew who my husband was and told me. But she maintained that if it became publicly known her husband's career would be ruined, for all his hopes lay in the favour of the Court; and he hoped to get a first rate embassy, and perhaps the portfolio of a Minister afterwards.

“ ‘The father of your prince is already suspected for his opinions,’ she said ‘and the Queen hates him, as she hates all revolutionaries. If she found out his son had married an innkeeper's daughter, and that daughter my niece, we should be ruined. And be sure they would prove your marriage irregular.’ I fancy she had kept

dark altogether her own relationship to the innkeeper of Termini. She added a further reason why the Court should be furious at such a marriage. She declared that my mother was mad. In that family, she protested, the eldest daughter had gone mad, for two or three generations, at the birth of her first child, and had only recovered fully when the second was born. Perhaps it was all a fable but it terrified me.

“‘Do you suppose,’ she cried fiercely, ‘my father would have let his eldest daughter marry an innkeeper if anyone else would have married her? And your mother was beautiful — far more beautiful than you. And you are *her* eldest daughter: her only child. She was mad when you were born. And she died mad. So will you be mad if any child is born of you.’

“I was terrified and assured her that no child was coming: but she knew it was untrue: though she pretended to believe me.

“‘The best thing you can do,’ she said, ‘is to enter religion, and I will let the prince know you are dead. So you will be dead — to the world and him.’

“After a while she told me that his elder brother had died, and that he himself had been received into the Queen’s favour. It was more and more important that no breath of his marriage with me should reach the Court; best of all if he could believe I was dead.

“This was after we came to England. About the same time I heard by chance of this community of exiled French nuns, and began to think I would come here: but not until after my child should be born. Sometimes I quite disbelieved what the Duchessa had said of my poor mother’s madness: I could remember her faintly and she had always been gentle and sweet to me. At other times I was not so sure: it was true that my mother had been strange, very sad and silent, and that, though she was not shut up or held in any restraint

she never went out except to Mass, and never saw company or went into it: and she used to have a nurse, a hard, austere woman who seldom left her alone. My father was always kind to his wife, and respectful, but I could recollect that the nurse's manner to her was compassionate and melancholy. After she was dead and when I grew older I remembered this, but I knew then that my mother had been noble, and had married out of her own class, and that I thought explained my father's way of treating her with a pitying sad respect. After her death he scarcely ever mentioned her to me: when he did it was always with the same tender respectful sadness. And as I grew older he had something of that manner towards myself. When first the prince, whom we called Don Ferrante, said he wished to marry me, my father seemed troubled: but by that time he thought of nothing but politics: it was true that he had revolutionary ideas — and perhaps he began to think that it might help if one of the royal princes were bound to his side. He might even have had a dream of my prince becoming King if there were changes, a King on the people's side.

“Sometimes, I say, I would disbelieve my aunt's story as to my mother's madness: at others it would terrify me, and then I could hardly bear the thought of what was coming on me. From London I wrote to my husband, for I knew then who he was and thought it would be no longer impossible to get a letter to him. I never had any reply, and I am sure now that the letter never left the embassy. At the time I made up my mind he would not acknowledge me. At last I ran away and came here; but I stopped at Basingstoke and there my child was born in the inn. I was at first very ill and I thought I was going to die: I asked the people if there was a Catholic church in the place, and they said No, but that a priest on his way to London was sleeping in

the house, and they brought him. He was an old man, very kind and gentle. He baptized my son, and gave him all the names I chose without asking me questions or seeming surprised. I had him called Ferrante Mario Guiseppe Michelangelo, the last three were my father's names. The priest bade me take courage, and said I was not going to die. When he had to go away I felt less miserable; but soon I was terrified again. The woman of the inn was kind, too, but inquisitive; and she told me something that made me dread my aunt had sent someone to catch me; a dark foreigner had arrived and asked many questions about a young lady, who had run away from her friends, also a foreigner. The landlady and her husband had stoutly denied having seen any such lady. But I saw how curious the woman was, and I was really mad with terror. That night I dreamt a horrible dream — that I was caught and my baby killed before my eyes, and this I dreamt three times over. In the morning the landlady said the foreign man was gone by the Chalkminster coach: I asked what other coaches there were, and she told me there were many, but the evening coach to Bath passed through Avonsbury, and I determined to come on here. I was not very ill then, only crazy with fright and horror. I really thought my baby would be murdered if they got hold of him. At night I came away by the coach; it was Christmas Eve, and very dark and cold. Inside the coach there were three ladies, one very gentle, the others cross and disagreeable. About a mile and a half from here there was an accident, and the coach was upset, but I was not in the least hurt. I was standing shivering in the cold by the roadside watching the other passengers picking themselves up when I saw among those who had been outside a man from the Sicilian Embassy: it was the man to whom I had given my letter to the prince, asking him to post it, and not put it into the

Embassy bag. I remembered that someone had got up onto the top of the coach at a place called Parkhome where the horses changed, and perhaps it was this man. I am sure he was not on the coach at Basingstoke when I got in: but he might have joined it at Andover, or any place where we stopped to change horses. The light of a lantern fell on his face, and I recognized him easily: but I was standing in the dark, and he didn't see me. I ran away. There was no hedge on the roadside but the plain, unenclosed down. I made no sound as I ran in the frozen grass, and it was dark, only the dim star glimmer, for there was no moon. No one saw me and pursued me. On the top of the hill it was flat, and I saw a red light and crept towards it. The bells of the church here were ringing in Christmas; and I thought of the shepherds — and this light was a shepherd's cresset; the man was standing by it, and in his hands he had rosary-beads, so that I knew he was a Catholic. His lips were moving, and I saw what a beautiful, kind mouth it was. His face was beautiful altogether: not handsome, but like a saint's. I watched him till he had finished his beads, but I think he was always praying. He went to the fold to tend his sheep, and came back, and the more I watched him, the more sure I was that Our Lord had sent me and my baby to him. So I suddenly determined to trust my wretched son to him. I crept round the fold and made a little nest among the straw that was piled up outside it, and put the child into it. I had just finished when he gave a cry, and I started up and saw the shepherd coming round the fold holding his lantern high up near his face and peering about. I started back and hid myself behind a bush, kneeling on the frozen grass. I saw him find the child and lift it in his arms; he held it to his breast, like the Buon Pastore, in the pictures: and he carried it away back to his cresset fire.

"After a while I crept stealthily from bush to bush, until I could see them both. The child was sleeping in his arms, and he was crooning and praying over it with shining eyes: the red light of the fire seemed to gild them both. I waited a long while and at last, half-frozen, I came away, and found my way here. It was nearly midnight when I knocked at this door, and the nuns were going to the chapel for the midnight Mass. I told the portress I wished to hear it, and she brought me up to the chapel. Afterwards the prioress saw me, and gave me leave to stay. I had not a penny left, and could not go to the inn if I had wished. The nuns kept me as a visitor a while, and I asked to be allowed to join the community, saying what was true, that I had wanted to be a nun, but had fallen from my first vocation and had married; perhaps I thought that was why God had allowed so many troubles to fall on me. This I told the chaplain, an old man who died soon after. He said it might be so, but that any way my vocation seemed a true one, and God had given it back to me. Still he kept me waiting a time, and one day he sent for me, and said that he had read in a newspaper that my husband was dead, and I need wait no longer. So I became a nun here. Soon after that the old priest died."

"You never saw your son again?" asked the prioress.

"Never. I always had the idea that if it were suspected who he was some harm might fall to him from the malice of those who thought he should not exist. I knew how good his foster-father was. He would be happier growing up a shepherd than if he imagined himself a prince's son. Nothing but misery had come to me from being a prince's unacknowledged wife. I had nothing to give but prayers: and if I gave him up altogether he would be simply God's."

CHAPTER XLV

EVERYBODY knows that Tuesday is the great market-day in Chalkminster, but on that Monday, which was May Day, the carriers in the villages on the plain determined that they would take their carts to the town full of sightseers, and in this way they would make a good deal of money.

Among those who went from Avonsbury were Seringapatam and his father, who considered that it would be a moral spectacle for the boy.

The carrier's cart was quite full, and everybody was talking in holiday fashion: they all thought of it as an outing.

The horse found his load heavier than usual and went slowly: up the hills the passengers were requested to walk, and the men and young women did so. The older women and Seringapatam's father were allowed to sit still in the cart.

"Bide yo quiet," said the carrier pleasantly; "you've paid same as other as has two legs, and yo can tek it out that way."

Seringapatam was the youngest of the party and was not expected to talk: he was glad for he was in a daze of horror and excitement. All night he had been dreaming and the shadow of his dreams clung about him, as the dark mists clung to the plain.

He wished they were coming home again and it was all over: he did not say to himself that he longed for that man whom he had seen in his dreams, to be dead: but he did long for it: for he hoped then to be afraid

no more. He hardly heard what the people about him said, and when one of them clapped him on the shoulder and congratulated him on his luck in having the chance of seeing what few grown folks could say they had seen he almost shouted out.

None of them had seen what he had.

His dreams last night had reproduced it all with pitiless accuracy: there had been nothing fanciful in what had lived itself over again in his sleep, simply the bare facts.

And now it was all marching through his brain again; he remembered as if it was last night how he had stood at the kitchen door of the Manor House in Summer Avon, and the lady had come out to speak to him, and he had given her back her bracelet. How the woman in the kitchen had tittered and poked fun at him because he would not come in and wait for Miss Dauntsey by the fire. How he had refused the present she offered him, and had hurried away. At the end of the village he struck up onto the down, taking a straight line for home. His way brought him close to the old mill, and there he had found a smouldering bonfire of hedge-clippings and weeds, and that was a thing no reasonable boy could resist, so he stopped and gathered more weeds and rubbish to pile on the dull fire in hopes of seeing a good blaze. Then he saw a man coming and had retreated a little way: the fire gave no light at all and there was scarcely any moon. He could not see what the man was like! Almost immediately a girl came and joined the man, and Seringapatam made up his mind to watch, and if they were sweethearts, and fell to love-making he would yell out "Bo!" through the empty window-place, and take to his heels homeward across the downs.

Through his window he could see the girl's figure

standing just outside the door nearly opposite; but the man stood a bit to one side so he could not see him at all. The girl started chaffing her sweetheart about some other girl, and Seringapatam heard no retort from the man: then the girl laughed jeeringly and stood still jingling money in her hand. There was a sound as if the man walked hastily away, but on the down grass his footsteps ceased almost immediately to be audible. The girl turned half round to pick up something from the floor of the mill, still jingling her money in her hand: it seemed as if the man could not have gone far for instantly there was a quick sound of light steps, and of a spring. The man leapt towards the girl and had her in his arms: Seringapatam heard two horrible sounds, a strangled moan, as the woman fell to the ground with the man's weight bearing her down, and of a ghastly cutting with a sharp knife. It was at that moment that the bonfire the boy had heaped with dried grass blazed up, blazed for very few seconds but long enough for him to see the whole inside of the mill, for the bonfire was just outside the door. He saw the murdered woman lying on her back, and the face and figure of the man who had done it. A gypsy fellow, lean and slight, but tallish, with yellow-brown skin, shallow black eyes, and black hair. The same gypsy, though the boy never knew that, who had come to the side of the frozen marsh and watched Hurdcott skate, had picked up his knife and the bit of severed strap, and taken both away: who had that same night crept back to the mill and flung Hurdcott's knife deep into the snow drift when it blocked the door.

Before the flame from the bonfire had died out Seringapatam had fled, but he never knew if its light had shewn his face at the window. If it had he was sure the man would find him and murder him, too.

"Lord! how timrush the lad be for a sojer's son as lost his leg i' battle!" cried the man who had clapped him on the shoulder, with a loud guffaw.

"Dessay," observed a woman, "this Urkitt were a timrush lad onst. See what we may come to!"

"Nay. Urkitt were niver timrush by what I iver heerd on un. Allus rumpchus. A wild gypsy lad, drop lard knows whens. I niver could abide them blackish chaps," retorted the man whose hair was tow-coloured.

Seringapatam shivered. The gypsy's hard black eyes seemed staring at him everywhere.

When they reached the town and the mist still lay thick, there were reproaches against the carrier that he had come so slow.

It seemed impossible to get good places: the market place was crowded already. Seringapatam could not regret it: he had no wish to be too near.

His father, however, did his best, and after an hour's thrusting and edging got himself and the boy within sight of the gallows. For half an hour more they waited: then St. Thomas' bell began to toll. The mist did not lighten, though it was May Day; and after all they could barely see what happened. The face and figures of those upon the scaffold were wrapped in a dark, thick curtain.

When all was over and the crowd began to break up, many who had shared their ill-luck edged nearer to the gallows: among them the boy and his father. By this time Seringapatam was half faint, half wild. All was over and he felt no ease, no lighting of the spirit. When would his father take him home!

The press behind brought them to the gallows' foot just as the dead man's body was being taken down; close to him was the priest who had reproached the boy for

not telling the truth, and the gentleman who had given him half a crown.

Seringapatam saw them first: then slowly with irresistible, horrible attraction his eyes drew to the man whom he had seen in so many walking and sleeping dreams.

His father had edged and elbowed him forward, making great business with his wooden leg on the toes of those who obstructed.

There was a shrill scream and a boy's treble tone rang out:

"That's not him as done it! Yon's not the man."

The crowd behind was chattering: on those in front a hush crept. And hundreds of staring eyes were turned towards the boy. He was staring still with wide, horrified gaze on the dead man.

The sheriff, the priest, and Basil heard the cry and turned to him. The hangman, too.

"Seringapatam!" exclaimed Basil.

The hangman clutched at his crape mask, but the black tape that bound it had burst and it fell.

"Ah!" shrieked the boy. "Ah! you're the man." And a quivering finger pointed at the gypsy who had volunteered to take the hangman's place.

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Many years afterwards a monk whose name had been Basil "in the world" sought among the graves in Avonsbury churchyard for one in which, on a May morning at sunbreak, he had seen the two people he had best loved laid to rest.

It was a hot summer noon, and as he turned in from the road he had been half-smothered in a cloud of dust from a noble lord's passing chariot: on its panels were

what had been his own arms and Lord Winterslow and his sour-faced lady scarce noticed the shabby cleric, in rusty black.

Behind the old church, which might have been that of the nuns whom Henry VIII disposessed, the monk found the flat stone slab marking the grave he sought. Moss and grass had grown over it, and the inscription could be no longer read.

It once ran thus: veiled in decorous Latin.

“Here lie the bodies of Ferrante Mario Guiseppe Michelangelo di Borbone of the Royal House of Spain and the Two Sicilies, and of Consuelo his wife who died on one day May 1st 1820.

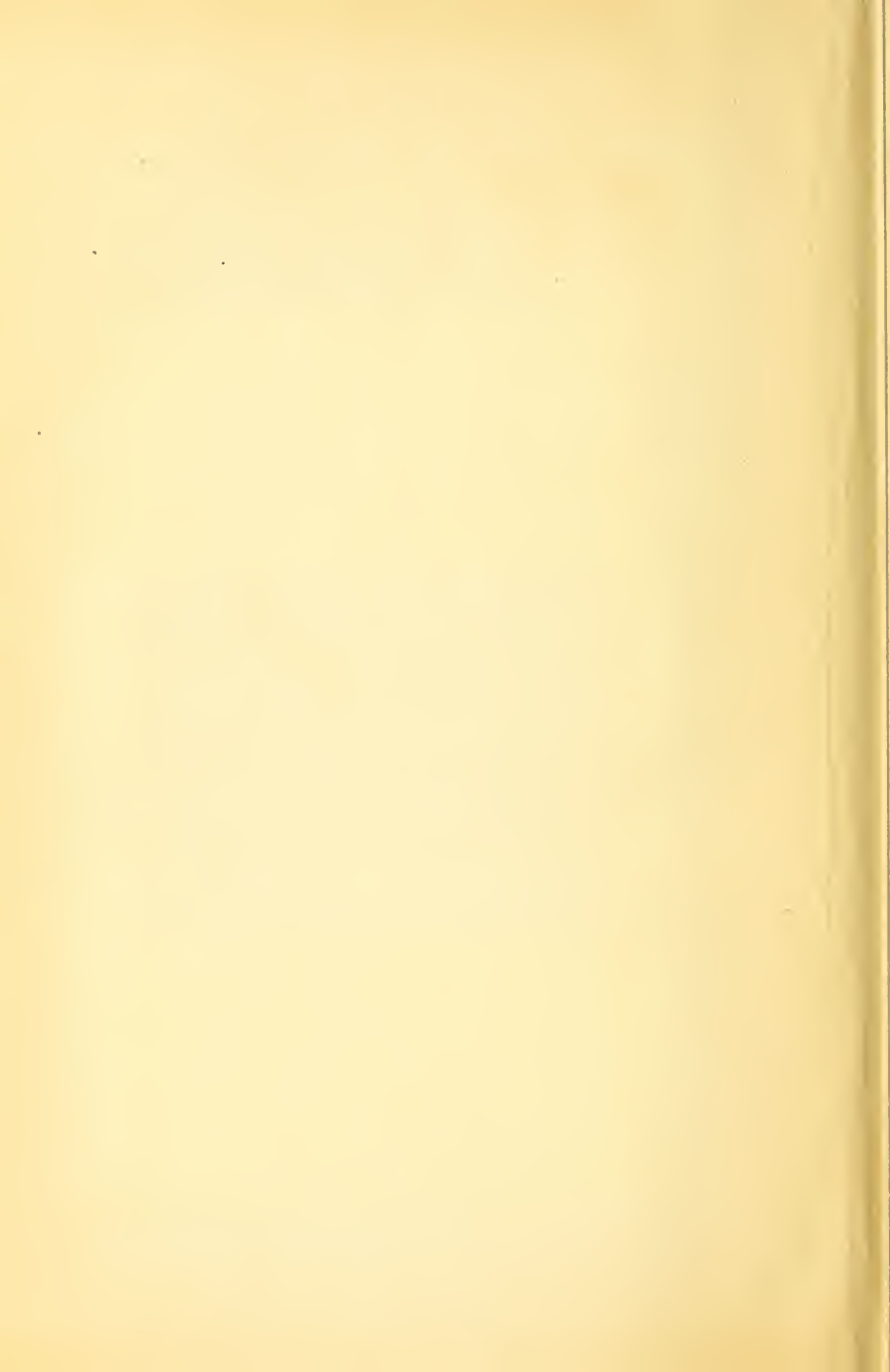
In death they were not divided.

The Good Shepherd calleth his sheep by their names.

O grave, where is thy sting?”

THE END





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